SURESH RAINA

WITH BHARAT SUNDARESAN

Believe

What Life and Cricket Taught Me

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What Life and Cricket Taught Me

PENGUIN BOOKS

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BELIEVE

Suresh Raina is one of India's most successful international cricketers. An aggressive left-handed middle-order batsman, a useful off-spin bowler and one of the best fielders in world cricket, Raina was part of the World Cup-winning team in 2011. He is a youth icon and is among the most-followed Indian sportspersons on social media.

Bharat Sundaresan is a world-renowned, award-winning cricket writer currently based in Adelaide, Australia. He is the Australian correspondent and senior writer for Cricbuzz, having previously spent over a decade covering cricket around the globe for the Indian Express. He is also the bestselling author of The Dhoni Touch.

This book is a work of non-fiction. The views and opinions expressed in it are those of the author only and do not reflect or represent the views and opinions held by any other person.

This book is based on actual events that took place in the author's life and reflects the author's present recollections of such experiences over time, as truthfully as recollection permits and/or can be verified by research. All persons within the book are actual individuals, and the names and characteristics of some individuals have been changed to respect their privacy.

The objective of this book is not to hurt any sentiments or be biased in favour of or against any particular person, society, gender, creed, nation or religion.

To my beloved parents, who made me
who I am; and to Priyanka, Gracia
and Rio, who make me who I am

1

Believe in Yourself

It's a mantra. It's a slogan. It's my way of life. It's my greatest life lesson.

And I owe it to Sachin Tendulkar—Paaji to me. As with pretty much every Indian of my generation, he has been a great inspiration, always. I was, however, fortunate enough to get to share a dressing room with him, bat in the middle with him, and also experience some of the greatest highs and lows of my cricketing career with him. It has always been a privilege and a blessing to have Sachin Paaji as a part of my life. I am truly honoured to even be able to say that.

I had looked up to him long before I met him in person for the first time. Paaji and I would go on to have some memorable moments on and off the field for nearly a decade. But there was one meeting in particular that changed my entire approach to life. It happened in 2014, only a few months after Paaji had brought an end to his legendary career.

I was the one who had approached him. This was a few weeks before the England tour. I was going to Mumbai anyway. I had a few ad shoots lined up there, and I thought it was a great opportunity to pick Sachin Paaji's brain. So I called him up and asked if he could come work with me on my batting. He not only agreed immediately but also made sure he was available at the cricket centre at the

Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) every time I went there. I was staying at a hotel not too far. When I contacted the guys in charge at the BKC, it turned out that they had already heard from Paaji.

I was there for two weeks, and Sachin Paaji came to every training session, spending three hours with me on each occasion. He was fully involved, and I was overawed by how much effort he was putting in to get me ready for England. It was high-intensity training.

During one of the sessions, he pulled me aside and said these golden words that have changed my life: 'Believe in yourself. You can do it.'

From that point on, he said those words to me every day, after nearly every drill we did. And maybe for the first time in my career and life, I began believing in myself instead of counting on external factors.

The basis of Paaji's comment was his belief that while batting styles and techniques can be perfected in the nets, what wins matches for your country is having the perfect mindset out there in the middle. As it turned out, I went to England and scored a hundred in eighty balls, in the very first One Day International (ODI) at Cardiff, which won India the match. In fact, we ended up winning the series 3-1 after what had been a very tough Test tour for the team, and I was man of the series. Paaji was the first person to send me a congratulatory message on my phone. Not surprisingly, it read, Always believe in yourself.'

My friend was getting a tattoo around that time. He asked me if I wanted one too. I had never really been a tattoo guy before that. A tattoo is something you commit your life to and carry with yourself forever. Currently, I have a tattoo of my wife's and children's

names. But it was back in 2014 when I got inked for the first time ever. It was a message that I knew would be the cornerstone of whatever decision I would take on or off the field. I got it done on my right arm. It simply says: BELIEVE.

My chats with Sachin Paaji during those two weeks in Mumbai weren't very technical to be honest. They were focused more on how I could change my mindset towards the game. He would always say that one has to constantly adapt to different conditions and circumstances as a batsman. Your technique will always be evolving, and that's how it should be.

He did show me a couple of batting techniques as well, teaching me how to play the ball really late in England and how to play the ball close to the body to control the swing. He would bring along this specific kind of plastic ball. At times, he would give me throwdowns too with it. He would often stay back after a session to converse with me and comment on that day's practice. The feedback was all positive, all about backing yourself and your way of playing cricket. That's what he did for twenty-four years after all.

Sachin Paaji is quite literally a child of the game. He is also always childlike in his passion when talking about the game. He understands it so well, can comprehend every minute detail about what happens during a game and then can express his observations very well.

We won the 2011 World Cup because of him. Not just because of the runs he scored. His contributions behind the scenes were even more valuable. He would keep advising all of us through every match as to what could be done, sensing the tone of the game. After we had won the quarterfinals, he told me that it was Yuvi (Yuvraj Singh) and my batting that had done the trick, and that I would go a long way because of my understanding of the game.

long way because of my understanding of the game.

Words like these stay with you forever. And this wasn't the only instance of him being a great support. There were numerous matches where he would come and give me his words of wisdom and compliment my performance. That really meant a lot.

My earliest memories of cricket obviously involve some of Paaji's great knocks during the 1990s. There were so many of them. But some of his Test centuries were unforgettable, especially in Australia. Many an off day at the hostel was spent watching him bat on TV.

I'll never get over my first-ever meeting with him. It was around 2001, when I was in Mumbai for the first time, having received a scholarship to play for Air India in the Times Cricket Shield tournament. We had our practice sessions at the MIG Cricket Club ground in Bandra. That's where Paaji did his practice too. His old friend Atul Ranade was around at that point, and one day he informed me that Sachin Tendulkar would be coming around that evening. I literally begged him to introduce me to Paaji.

I can't express how excited I was, even though twenty years have passed. I stayed back for over two hours at the ground to make sure I didn't just meet Paaji but also got to watch him practise. What struck me about him immediately was his humility.

When Atul Bhai introduced me to him, Paaji could have easily just smiled politely, said hello and walked away; I was only a random kid with a cricket kit. But he actually hung around and had a proper conversation with me. He even let me hold one of his bats briefly. Such a megastar but so down-to-earth.

There's so much to learn from Sachin Tendulkar, and I got my first lesson the moment I was in his presence on that day at the MIG

lesson the moment I was in his presence on that day at the MIG Cricket Club. I learnt how you need to always maintain your fitness, in a holistic sense, while keeping in touch with reality, no matter how big and famous you get. Like me, he too was from a middle-class background and had strong roots in the culture he came from. I could relate with him a lot, even if at that point I was just a junior cricketer and he the biggest star of the sport. That brief meeting was enough to tell me that while scoring hundreds and winning matches for your country might be the ultimate goal, it didn't mean much if you didn't possess humility. That's how you earned respect: by being humble in your success.

I only got to meet him next after I had already made my international debut in 2005. He wasn't part of the Indian squad on that Sri Lanka tour, where I played three ODIs. We first faced each other during the Challenger Trophy, in late 2005, in Mohali. I also remember being called up to the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore from our India Under-19 camp in September of 2003. It was again a full-strength Challenger Trophy. Paaji was part of one of the teams, and I got to watch him from up close without having had any access to him. I remember him getting V.V.S. Laxman LBW and bowling Rahul Dravid out. Paaji could do anything on the cricket field.

The first time I took the field against Paaji was in October 2005, when he was part of the India Seniors team, and I was with India A, under V.V.S. Laxman. In that tournament, Paaji got out to both Sreesanth and Piyush Chawla, and their stocks rose incredibly as a result. It was a surreal moment, sharing the cricket field with him. Though he didn't make too many runs in the game, it still gave me goosebumps to see him bat.

Then, before long, one of my dreams came true when I finally got to share a dressing room with Sachin Tendulkar. But let me first tell

share a dressing room with Sachin Tendulkar. But let me first tell you about the time we were in the same fitness camp organized by the National Cricket Academy. It was in 2004, and there were some practice matches being held. In those games, we would bat together and put on some runs on the board.

He never believed in any hierarchy within the team and would do his fielding drills with the likes of me, Irfan Pathan, M.S. Dhoni and other younger players around. I remember how he always loved talking about the techniques of throwing the ball and would constantly give tips to us youngsters. We also ended up having numerous conversations about fitness, and he would explain how physical fitness in general is different from match fitness.

I remember the first time I shared a dressing room with him. I was randomly stuck between Paaji and Rahul Bhai. It was way too intimidating. I got so nervous that after a while I just went and sat with Dhoni and

Venugopal Rao in a corner. That was how much I was overawed by those two, and that was the kind of respect I had for them.

There was also the incident when Yuvraj Singh, Yuvi Pa, put me on the spot. It was a sort of initiation that all young players had to go through back then. We had to give a speech introducing ourselves, mainly to the senior players. Yuvi asked me who my favourite cricketer was, and without even blinking once I said, 'Rahul Dravid.' Of course, Yuvi wasn't letting me off the hook that easy. He had a very pointed follow-up question. 'Rahul Dravid? Not Sachin Tendulkar? But Sachin's sitting right here, and he's a great player too. Why wouldn't you say his name?' he asked. All I could do was smile nervously. I had no response. I was so shy.

Thankfully, Sachin Paaji also joined in the fun and started laughing.

In fact, he chimed in with, 'Yeah, Suresh, why am I not your favourite player?'

It was all in good fun and was just a sign of how relaxed the dressing room was back then. It was such a welcoming place for a youngster like me. That kind of open atmosphere also meant that from early on, I started feeling like I belonged there. And Sachin Paaji had a lot to do with it. Our bond strengthened very quickly.

There was so much to learn from all those initial tours alongside him. There was one to Sri Lanka, then the famous one to Pak-

istan in 2006, and the DLF Cup in Malaysia that same year.

One gets to learn a lot about life in general from Sachin. There is no doubt that he was the best at what he did on the field, and there is no one like him. But Sachin as a human being goes beyond that. His respect for others, his generosity, his capacity for enjoying the game, loving the game, and, most importantly, his humility —these were some of the qualities I picked up extensively from him. The moments we shared were really special, and they will always be very close to me.

Batting with Sachin Paaji was another major learning curve. There's so much you pick up, not just about the skills of facing world-class bowlers but also about taking decisions on and off the field. It's all about picking your moments and capitalizing on them.

Our first real partnership in the middle happened during a practice match, where I scored 95 and Paaji made 134. He was running and calling, guiding me through the game. The bowling attack we were facing was world-class: S. Sreesanth, Zaheer Khan and Ajit Agarkar. So it was quite a challenge, but one made much easier thanks to him. There's no junior-senior dynamic when you are playing on the

field, even if it's a practice match. And it's the same for everyone. That's the first thing Paaji told me.

Watching Sachin bat from the non-striker's end was a privilege. Calling it the best seat in the house is an understatement. All the hard work you put in to reach the highest level was worth it just so you could watch him play his shots from up close. I have lost count of the number of times I've been amazed by the shots he played. Whether it was the backfoot punch or the straight drive or the pull shot, and I can keep going, they were all an absolute treat to watch. Unfortunately, we didn't get to bat much with each other in GDIs. There were only five instances.

His timing and his understanding of the situation—the bowler, the pressure around, whether we have to attack at that point or just keep playing each ball—was what made him the best batsman ever. His judgement under such circumstances was really good. He also knew exactly the right bowler to target at the right time. And his running between the wickets, of course, is rightly the stuff of legends. He would run your runs with the same intensity as he ran his. But he was never the sort who wouldn't listen to you. If I picked up something from observing a bowler or the opposition captain's tactics, he was more than eager to learn too. That's such a special trait to have. He always said that learning never stops on the cricket field.

Off the field though, Sachin Paaji was like a big brother to all the junior members of the team. He's always full of life and always excited about talking to you and learning about you. He would keep interacting with us after the match too—asking us about our families, hometowns, educational backgrounds and stuff like that. Led by Paaji, the other seniors, too, would always look out for us. It really felt like you were never away from your family. This was

your family on the road.

There are some unforgettable partnerships that we shared, mostly in ODI cricket and, of course, the one during my Test debut. There was the 13 7-run stand against Australia in Hyderabad, where he played out of his skin and made 17 5 of the best runs you'll ever see. It was heart-breaking that we couldn't get the team over the line, losing by three runs while chasing 351. I had rarely seen Paaji look more disappointed than he did that night, despite having played one of the greatest ODI innings. The team not winning hurt much more than his own individual achievements. That was a major takeaway for me.

I was at the other end in Bangladesh, when he famously scored his hundredth hundred in international cricket in 2012. It had come after a lot of waiting and a lot of pressure that he'd had to endure from everyone. But I remember him telling me how relieved he felt at that moment and how he felt that he had aged faster during those months waiting to reach this extraordinary milestone.

The best time I spent with Paaji in the middle was during my maiden innings in Test cricket, in 2010. Firstly, to walk out and have the great Sachin Tendulkar waiting to greet you in the centre … It was a special feeling. There were plenty of nerves, but some of the anxiety settled down the moment I met him.

He kept asking me to play patiently and bat for as long as I could. Sri Lanka had really good bowlers at that time. Muttiah Mu-ralitharan had retired in the previous Test, but they still had Suraj Randiv and Ajantha Mendis, who were bowling well in tandem. Dilhara Fernando and Dhammika Prasad, too, were challenging fast bowlers in home conditions. The SSC pitch in Colombo was relatively flat, though. The hosts had made over 600 runs, and we

were batting to save the Test.

Paaji asked me to gauge each bowler and play accordingly. Running was the key, and the batting was to be done sessionwise. Play as many balls as possible, and whenever there is a loose ball, hit it for a six or four. The most important part was to remain positive. That was what he kept repeating. We ended up putting on 256 runs and eventually helped India go past 700 and dominate the match. Paaji made another double century.

When I was at around 90, he had told me not to worry about the century but to concentrate on the game just like I had been doing; the rest, he said, would automatically follow. And I remember telling him that it was my as well as my father's dream that I score a 100 with Sachin on my Test debut. He just smiled and said, 'Look, it's happening!' When I scored the century, all he said was, 'Enjoy the moment. You deserve it.' I couldn't believe the dream had come true.

Something funny happened the day after the Test. Paaji, as we all know, loves his food. He decided to take me and a few other team members to a Japanese restaurant. Here I was, a dal-roti person who grew up only on desi food, in a very alien setting. Paaji ordered sushi, and I knew nothing about it at all. All I had heard of was wasabi, but I had no idea how it tasted. Paaji and Yuvi Pa, who was also there, encouraged me to have the wasabi paste, which I did without fuss. For the next hour or so, I was dying. My eyes were all watery, and I must have drunk gallons of water. They kept laughing their hearts out. It was very funny —for them, not for me.

Paaji knew how to celebrate and be happy for other people's success too. What struck most was how such a renowned personality was this down-to-earth and how nothing could come in the way of him serving the nation. When a big player like him wants to be a part of

serving the nation. When a big player like him wants to be a part of celebrating your success, it feels really good and motivates you a lot. It taught me to enjoy everyone's success within the team the same way as I enjoyed my own, if not a little more. It shaped me as a cricketer.

Paaji has always been very generous with his time and his space when it comes to me. In 2017, my wife Priyanka, daughter Gracia and I went to his house. It was when Zaheer was getting married. His wedding was four days before my birthday. So, to celebrate my birthday, Paaji called us the next day and cooked for us. We all had a great time. He was so good to Gracia and played with her a lot. We had met Paaji's wife, Anjali, a couple of times as well, and she is as generous a host as Paaji.

I can also recall some memorable off-field anecdotes with Paaji. This one really stands out. It happened in 2006. We were flying somewhere for a match, and I was sitting in business class with him. I was pretty young back then. One of the airhostesses walked up to him and asked for his autograph. She then turned to me and said, 'Hi, Arjun, how are you? How is your mom?'

Before I could say anything, Paaji jumped in and said that we were both doing well and that Anjali was upset with me because I had not been studying and stuff. Of course, the stewardess had mistaken me for Arjun Tendulkar. It was hilarious, but Paaji winked at me and asked me to play along. It was much later, when she saw someone clicking a photo with me, that she realized I wasn't Arjun but an Indian cricketer myself. She came up and apologized to me. I just smiled and said it was okay. She was so embarrassed, though.

There are many things that I learnt from Sachin Paaji. For starters, he was more disciplined than anyone I have seen. He gave the game his 100 per cent at all times— paying attention to his fitness,

technique and to the game in general. It was always a treat and an honour to share the dressing room and the pitch with him. And his respect for the game is just commendable. He would always carry this picture of his kids, wife and Sai Baba with him, which I had first seen in 2005. It was in his kitbag. Since then, I started carrying a picture of Sai Baba too.

I had grown up watching Sachin play. The moment he got out, I would turn off the television, like millions of Indians everywhere. At our place, we would always discuss his game during every match. From there to playing with him was definitely a big transition for me, one that taught me how to respect not just the game but also people. The moments I spent with him were huge turning points in my life, shaping my mindset. He taught me how to be calm, positive, generous, tolerant and a better human being, both on and off the field. Over and above that, he taught me how to believe in myself.

2

Tales from Muradnagar

I was only ten years old when it happened. My memories are still very vague from that morning. But they are strangely vivid enough for me to never be able to forget them completely.

Our home was within the ordnance factory complex in Muradnagar. We all used to sleep in one room. And when the police knocked at our door at an odd hour, Papa was really scared. He knew something was wrong. They told us about my brother Rakesh's accident but didn't yet tell us that he was dead. So, Papa left on his bicycle and my elder brother, Dinesh, went on his bike. Everyone was shocked, and they heard the news only when they reached the spot.

For me back then, it was extremely difficult to process what had happened. I had no clue what had transpired. I just knew something was not right with Rakesh

Bhaiya. I could see people crying around me while my sister Pinky held on to me and kept asking me not to go to the room where the body was kept. What scared me more was that both my parents were crying. I had never seen that before. Meenakshi, my bhabhi and Rakesh's widow, was expecting at that time.

This happened on 16 July 19 9 7. It was the most unfortunate accident you could ever imagine. Bhabhi used to work at a factory

and do a night shift, while Bhaiya had a day shift. She would start at 10 p.m. and finish at 5 a.m. That morning, she was returning with the other 20-25 women who worked with her. Unfortunately, the same bus collided into the truck that Bhaiya was travelling in. He was seated behind the driver and suffered serious head injuries. Bhabhi didn't really realize it. She was seated at the back, got off and went home blissfully unaware of the tragedy that was to occur. The only two people who immediately knew what had happened were the bus driver and one of Rakesh Bhaiya's friends, Rana. But they both got scared and ran away, fearing that they might be pulled into some court case.

What rankles me to this day is that my brother's life could have been saved. There was a hospital, called Surti Ram Bhim Singh, very close to where the bus would stop to drop off Bhabhi and where the accident took place. If only either Rana or the driver had carried Bhaiya to the hospital, his life would have been saved. It was less than five minutes away. But such is life, and such is death. We can never claim to be in control of our destiny when it comes to those two aspects.

I wanted to go to the cremation ground, but Mom didn't allow me, since it would have been quite a disturbing experience for a kid. The neighbours kept coming in over the next two days to offer their condolences. My dad held up quite well eventually and supported everyone at that time. It was a tough time for us.

My elder brother Dinesh was furious at Rana and even made a police complaint. That guy came back after a while and apologized profusely to him, saying he had become very scared for his own safety. Dinesh Bhaiya eventually forgave him.

I never quite got over it, though. One day, when Rana was still

absconding, I didn't let anyone know and went in search of him. I was just so angry, despite being a little boy. When Dinesh Bhaiya got to know, he brought me back and realized how upset I was regarding Rana not having helped my brother. That one thing bugged me a lot, especially because we used to stay in a small town where everyone was like family to each other. We would eat meals at each other's places, hang out at each other's homes. It was the classic small-town setup. We were all brothers and sisters. How does one then abandon someone you consider your brother while he's at death's door and run away thinking only about your own self? I, of course, had a lot to learn in life at that stage.

Rakesh Bhaiya had always been very protective of me. He was the most intelligent of my four brothers. I would say the brightest member of our family. He had topped most of his exams and had got a very good job at Shriram Pistons.

There was this one time when I was playing cricket in town and the ball went into someone's house. When I went to take it, they slapped me a few times really badly, and I came home crying. Rakesh Bhaiya had just come home and was eating. When he got to know what had happened, he went and beat up the fellow who had slapped me. Mukesh Bhaiya always wanted me to explore my potential in sport while never losing focus on studies. He used to own this Yamaha RX-135 bike and would take me on rides all around town. I loved those times with Mukesh Bhaiya. He might have left us way too young, but he has never quite left me.

The greatest coincidence, and one that I am most fond of, is that the first Man of the Match award that I won came the same day as my late brother's birthday. Call it a universal power or fate or anything you want. That day, I felt a deep connection with him. He would keep coming in my dreams, saying that he's always supporting me

and asking me to make sure that I take care of our parents and my family.

One of the most special moments of my life came when I won a bike as a Man of the Match award once and gave it to Sunny, Mukesh Bhaiya and Meenakshi Bhabhi's son. My nephew got married a couple of years ago and has a daughter.

* * *

If you go to Muradnagar and ask what the place is known for, the chances are someone might answer 'Suresh Raina' in jest. At least that's what most locals say now. Not that I take that too seriously. There's a lot of history about the place, including the railway station. It is a major junction these days when you head deeper into UP from Delhi. There's also the ordnance factory. Our town is famous these days for being the location where Anushka Sharma and Varun Dhawan shot the movie Sui Dhaaga. There's also the club where I started playing cricket initially.

We used to have a famous Ramlila there. I would go, along with boys my age, from house to house collecting contributions or donations for the event. I was always a people person and never hesitated to approach someone if there was a job to be done. The senior boys would usually push me to go talk to everyone for collecting money. A couple of times, I would be shooed away without any money. So, what I would do was collect marbles.

Once, I was playing with darts, and one of them went and hit my brother Dinesh right in the neck. This other time I was playing with a top, which went and landed on his foot, hurting him horribly. After both the incidents, I got beaten up by him. I was very naughty, and there might be few locations in Muradnagar where I didn't get into trouble or wasn't given a smacking.

Dad had a habit of smoking in the morning. I would light his matchsticks to check the time on his wristwatch, since we didn't have a wall clock and of course no mobile phones. Once, while I was trying to do that, I ended up burning his pillow. Needless to say, I got beaten up again. They had given up hopes that I would sober up. I had that passion to be playful as a child.

While my parents were settlers in that town, most of the others were from UP. There were two sisters, Mamta Di and Poonam Di, whose house I would visit for tuitions. She beat me whenever I wouldn't study, and Mom used to keep saying that only she was capable of bringing me back on track. So, I was very scared of her. Most of the time, I would hide my books or pull some other trick of that sort. I didn't like studying, and they had timed the tuition so that I would miss my playtime. On top of that, she would give me extra classes. Half the time, I would be mad and hide my books.

Once she found the books and then complained to my mom. Both of them beat me, though they found the whole episode hilarious at the same time. They were amused that this kid would go through so much just to avoid studying, simply because he wasn't allowed to play, knowing very well that he wouldn't get away with it.

Even my sister Pinky used to go to her for tuitions. So once, when she went for her classes, I broke her piggy bank and took some money out of it. When she came back and found out, she complained to our eldest brother, and he punished me for an hour. I can't recall now, but I must have been asked to become a murga.

More than half the times I got into trouble was because I wanted to play, and they wouldn't allow me for whatever reason. At times, Mamta Di's brother would stand at the door to prevent me from leaving, and once I got caught going over the boundary wall of their

leaving, and once I got caught going over the boundary wall of their house. They eventually just gave up, saying 'tu nahi sudhrega' (you will never change).

On one occasion, I chose a basketball match in the village over studying for a maths exam. By the way, there was a point in my life when basketball took over from cricket. My mom came in search of me. In one hand she had a dough of atta, which she had been kneading, and in the other she had a loelan (rolling pin). She beat me up in front of everyone, telling me how education was way more important than playing and that eventually it would be my education that was going to help me. Then she dragged me home by the ear.

Thankfully, my brother helped me study through the night, and I performed decently in the exam, though maths was my weak point back then. However, the fact that she had beaten me up with a rolling pin in front of everyone that day made me so embarrassed that I didn't go back to play for a good few days after that incident. Once the exam results were out, I went back and everyone praised me. Academically, my only problem was maths. I was quite *damadol* (weak) in it. Other subjects, like Sanskrit, Hindi, geography, science, etc., were absolutely fine.

I also used to bunk school quite often, either to play cricket or, mostly, to watch the Indian team play on TV. Especially those matches in Sharjah, which were always very exciting, with Sachin Paaji being the centre of attention. We didn't have a TV at home back then. We would have a *langar* (community meal) at school, which I would miss, skip the last two classes of the day and go. Me and a few other friends together. Among them, one was a Muslim guy called Jamal, who would get amazing food in his tiffin, including non-veg. We would all eat that, and my mom thankfully

didn't know, else she would have beaten me up till I puked out every morsel of it. We were strict vegetarians after all. Nobody in my family even went close to meat. I have occasion-

ally eaten meat here and there during my career.

Back then I was a kid, so I wouldn't really pay attention to what I was eating as long as it tasted good. And I would wait to get to the Guru Club to watch Sachin's batting. In school, the last two periods were always sports. So bunking was a lot easier. Then, after watching Sachin's batting, all my mates would have a detailed debate. We would discuss whatever we had learnt— watching Sachin, Viru and Rahul. Everyone would be there at the Guru Club. I guess some of them would have bunked their offices to come and watch the game.

Some of those games were memorable. Of course, the two centuries Paaji scored against Australia, but also his knocks against Zimbabwe (I was a fan of Murray Goodwin). I remember seeing Sachin Paaji making the most of a dropped catch and smashing Paul Strang and Henry Olonga for sixes everywhere. Not to forget Tony Greig on commentary making it all sound even more entertaining than usual. Of course, back home everyone would be searching for me. Bhaiya would be listening to the commentary on radio and would inform my parents that I must have bunked tuitions and must be watching cricket.

That group—members of the Guru Club team—was very helpful for me. They knew I was trying for the sports hostel at that point, so the coaches and senior players would make me practise. Then, while they would have those discussions, I would take notes in my diary. There was Vivek, a leggie who used to love and idolize Shane Warne; and Israr Bhai, who used to bat like Ijaz Ahmed and was so

talented. Those guys would talk about the legends of the game, Gundappa Viswanath and the like, and I was just intrigued. Guruji, the main guy there, also accompanied me for one of the selection trials to Meerut in a bus. The conductor saw my kitbag while we boarded the bus in Muradnagar and asked me what I had inside it that I was trying to sell. It was at Guru Club that I would get to practise all my fielding and learnt how to improve since they would hardly let me bat.

It wasn't only at home or with my studies that I got into trouble back in Muradnagar. Before joining the sports college, in my previous school I used to coach the women's team in middle school. I was in Class 7 or 8. Ashok Sir was the basketball coach for the senior team. Not surprisingly, I was coaching them a day before my exams. But I didn't have to wait till I was home that day to get into trouble.

After school, my best friend in town, Amit Chaudhary, and I went to his house, where we were making rotis and ended up burning the plastic beneath the stove. His aunt beat us up so bad after that and banned us from going anywhere near the stove. All I hoped for was his buaji to finish punishing us before his dad—Umender Uncle to me—got home. Umender Uncle,

after all, was this kabaddi champion who was extremely fit and a big guy. Both Amit and I swore we would never try to make rotis again.

Back in Muradnagar we would go and play in this *naala* (drainage canal) every morning. Amit and I were swimming there, and running and jumping in the dirty water, when this lady, who was washing clothes there, gave us a proper tongue-lashing, using cuss words we'd never heard before, and just shooed us away. We would

often go there. It was near this Shiv mandir, with a marketplace right adjacent to it, where they sold amazing kulfi and bread pakodas. Those are unforgettable memories, and I still have pictures of that place.

Growing up in a small town has its pros and cons. When I went to the sports hostel in Lucknow, some people in Muradnagar started spreading rumours about me, saying that I had gone to Lucknow to earn money for my family and that I was pulling a rickshaw to do that. So, when I came back and got to know about this, I got even more motivated to play well and shut them up, so that they knew who and what they were talking about. The next time I had a match, I played right near the rumour-monger's shop, and then he saw what I was capable of and why I was away. He was quite apologetic after that.

Papa used to work in the army initially. He would tour a lot. He was an extremely good listener and a brilliant man. If you see his photos, he looked absolutely like Dilip Kumar. He used to wear that black suit, like the actor, back in the day. He was very stylish.

Mom was also in army training in Himachal. She is an excellent shooter, for which she even won a trophy in a competition. They had called all the women in Kangra to compete, and she hit the target most times. She still remembers the barrel striking her shoulder.

Dad's side of the family was more educated. My uncle was a commander in the navy, while another uncle was in construction business in Bilaspur. Both their wives were very educated, and now their kids are settled all over the world. My parents never put pressure on us siblings to join the army.

In fact, I didn't even inform my dad when I did a tour of the Line of

In fact, I didn't even inform my dad when I did a tour of the Line of Control (LoC) for Aaj Tak in 2014. He would always keep asking me not to go to Kashmir since I was a hothead and might react abruptly to something that might not go as expected. He was a very learned man. He knew various languages—Pashtun, Hindi, Urdu, English, Punjabi and many others. He had come from Rainawadi. Dad's cousins were all seven feet tall. He wrote a diary keeping track of all his experiences. They were zamindars and had camels, horses and the like.

There was this one time when my dad had a dream about some treasure under his dad's bed. So, he started searching for it when his father was asleep, but he woke him up in the process and got beaten up. Then later, one of his uncles told him that he too thought there was something stored in that same spot. They finally put Dadaji to sleep with some medicine and started digging. But this time, my dad's mom caught them.

My granny was also very disciplined. They knew they would get into trouble if she saw what they were doing. So, they installed a *tirpal* (canvas tent) and guarded that area well and kept digging. Every day, they would go back at night and dig for a good 4-6 hours, till one day they actually came across gold and silver utensils, and a bunch of other valuables. Everyone was shocked. Then my dad distributed it all among the villagers, which is why people really loved and respected my dad. Even I didn't believe that story initially, but Dad would keep telling me that I should dream, believe in it and then work towards it. It was his way of reminding me that dreams do come true. Hard work pays off. Bad days don't last.

Our *kuldevta* (family deity) is in Jammu. We would read the Gita, worship various gods and goddesses, but we respected all religions and festivals. We are Brahmins, so our style of puja and various

traditions match those of the Tamil Brahmins. Thus, after marriage, my parents asked us to go to these particular temples in Tamil Nadu. Priyanka and I visited all of the Navgraha temples. I visited and stayed at Srini Sir's (N. Srinivasan) place, though Priyanka couldn't accompany me as she had to rush to Amsterdam. Srini Sir was the one who had organized the whole trip for us.

We mainly used to worship Bajrangbali. My brother Dinesh, too, is a deeply religious guy. He is into astrology as well. He is a disciple of Sai Baba, as are my parents. I once took them to Shirdi.

I would always visit the Golden Temple on my birthday—I had been doing that since childhood—unless there was some important match that I had scheduled. There was this one time we had a Duleep Trophy match in Patiala, on my birthday. I told Harvinder Singh, who is currently an Indian selector and was with the Central Zone team back then, that I wanted to go to the Golden temple, and he made sure I did. We travelled from Patiala to Amritsar. When we returned, the match initially got delayed due to very heavy fog. But then we played in that fog.

In that match, Mohammad Kaif made a great deal of runs, and I was like how the hell can you spot the ball. Manoj Tiwary played well too, taking his team to a lead. Then, towards the end, I took a catch, amid that fog, and we won. Kaif Bhai had told me that he wasn't sure if Naman Ojha, our wicketkeeper, was seeing the ball well enough. So I asked Kaif Bhai to stay at gully, and I stood at first slip. I remember R.P.

Singh's ball was missed by Naman. I quickly gathered the ball and threw it to the nonstriker's end, getting Ranadeb Bose runout. That was an important match for Kaif Bhai's comeback, and he was really happy.

* * *

There's a huge age gap between me and my brothers. My eldest brother, Mukesh, is fifty-seven now. The second brother, the late Rakesh Bhaiya, would have been fifty. The third youngest, Naresh, is forty-seven. And then Dinesh Bhaiya, who is forty-five. So yeah, twenty years' gap between me and my eldest brother. My sister and I are quite close. Pinky is 3 8-3 9, and I am thirty-four.

We all used to play cricket. The eldest brother has always been into academics. Rakesh Bhaiya, like I said, was the smartest of the lot. Naresh Bhaiya has always been into music. He has songs up on YouTube as well, under his name Naresh Raina, Sai Baba bhajans mainly. He was the reason I picked up singing from a very young age.

He had his whole music set at home— drum kit, piano, tabla and harmonium. He was pretty seriously into music till Dad told him that there was no future in music. After that, Naresh Bhaiya went to Shimla and did his engineering there.

Dinesh Bhaiya worked as a tutor even when he was in Class 12. Mukesh Bhaiya joined Papa at the ordnance factory. They would help my sister and me with our studies as well. Mom was mostly busy with cooking, cleaning and other such household chores.

We were all scared of our eldest brother, Mukesh Bhaiya. He would make sure we studied, and then he would let us play as well. He knew people in the factory, and on his recommendation they let me play for their team. One of our matches was recorded on VCR. It was the first time they had tried recording a match like that. The match was against Sonnet's team on a matting pitch. There were cameras only over the two sight screens. So, you could only see the batsmen and bowler.

and bowler.

You could say it was my first 'live' match. I fielded really well. All the locals had come to watch, with video screens having been put up as well. It was fun to watch myself play later. I ended up hitting a Ranji player called Manish for three sixes over midwicket. Dinesh Bhaiya also saw the game, and it was then that he approached me asking what I wanted to do in life since I had made quite a name for myself on the cricket field. In fact, it was one of his friends, Anil Kaushik, who suggested that I be sent to the sports hostel as that would enhance my chances of developing as a cricketer. Kaushik Bhaiya used to work with my brother Mukesh in the factory and had been at the sports hostel. But unfortunately, his hockey career had been cut short, owing

to a collarbone injury. He had watched me play and suggested that instead of playing for the factory I should attend the sports college and take professional training, as I was serious about the game and had the potential to perform well.

My nickname, Sonu, was given to me by Dinesh Bhaiya. In fact, people seldom called me Suresh. Dinesh Bhaiya taught me how to bat right-handed (I was a lefty in my initial days, when we used to play with a plastic ball). Then, after a few months, he asked me to go back to being a lefty, since that was more elegant and way different from the rest. He had also become a huge fan of Dada (Sourav Ganguly) and Yuvi. Mukesh Bhaiya and Dinesh Bhaiya helped me a lot with my game too.

I was born and brought up in UP itself. My brothers were all born in UP too. Once, my father even told Farooq Abdulla Sahib politely that we had come to UP and that we didn't want anything from his government.

I was never treated like an outsider in Muradnagar. My sister and brothers also went to school in UP. When you are raised in a small town, your world also tends to be smaller. Tejpal Sir is now my father-in-law, and Sushila Aunty, Priyanka's mom, was my mother's best friend. Dinesh's wife, Neha, was Priyanka's best friend, while her brother, Vivek, was my best friend in school. All of us—brothers and sisters—had been under Tejpal Sir's training in school, and my brother used to teach Priyanka and

Neha at our place—they were part of one of his tuition batches. Small world indeed.

* * *

Space was one major issue growing up, since we had only one room and a large family. Then, my elder brother got married. He needed privacy, and thus he started staying independently. That was when we took another room with four mattresses for the rest of us.

It was pretty tough financially. Papa and Dinesh Bhaiya used to work. My brother had started tutoring kids by then. My father would keep asking me to continue my studies, hoping I would get a good government job eventually, which would basically sort all the issues. Even I had started earning the odd Rs 500 from the matches I would play and win weekly.

As far as I can recollect, in 1998, Dinesh Bhaiya used to take me to the grounds to play cricket. Even back then, cricket wasn't just a game but more than that. I was serious about playing. There was this field in Muradnagar close to the ordnance factory. I played there a lot. And there was this troupe that used to perform during holidays and festivals—they would give me money as well when I played. For me, playing cricket professionally started from there. It was from there that I went on to play other local tournaments.

was from there that I went on to play other local tournaments.

Whatever prize money I got, I would give it to my dad, which would make him proud and happy. Soon, I became a sort of hero among the locals, and they would keep calling me for various matches. Then, slowly, I moved from tennis balls to leather balls. I learnt about playing on matting wickets and all the other technical aspects of the game. By that time, I was crazy about cricket. It had become my passion.

My first match on turf was at the Nehru Stadium in Modinagar. There was a man I called Chowdhury Bhaiya who would take me to various towns around Muradnagar, Modinagar, Meerut or even Ghaziabad, to play whenever I requested him to get me there. Since I didn't have money, I would just accompany him; we would travel hanging from the train doors. There were a couple of players who often had to run errands in the middle of a match or had to go back home, and the seniors would ask me to replace them on the field. We didn't have pads or anything you would call proper equipment. That didn't matter, though. We would use cotton and stuff it into a cloth and that became a pair of gloves to play with. It was an extremely desi version of cricket.

The sport had become a part of me and my growth at a very young age. It was through cricket and those early tournaments though that I began to learn the value of money, even though there wasn't much of it at that stage. I remember how concerned my parents were when I was selected to go to the sports hostel in Lucknow. Papa used to make a mere Rs 6000-7000 per month; we all depended on that. When the college told us that Rs 10,000 was the annual fee and not monthly, it seemed reasonable to me, and I requested my father to let me go. Moreover, this place had a boarding facility as well, which meant my accommodation was covered.

covered.

My hostel trial was in Ghaziabad, where there were 500 students. After that, I went to the Meerut trial, which had even more kids. The final round in Lucknow had kids from across the state, around 2000 kids, each getting to bat five balls at the most. I played 2-3 good shots, and the selectors included me in the final list. There were a couple of Ranji Trophy players among the selectors. In the final round, they let me play fifteen balls, which made the fellow students think that I had already been selected, though that wasn't true. In those fifteen balls, I could only play a couple of shots. But when we got the result, my name was in the top fifteen.

That meant Papa had to pay Rs 10,000, for which he had to take a loan. I tried to fit the expenses for all my books, uniform, kitbag and the basics that needed to be taken to the hostel within that loan money.

When I was at the Lucknow hostel, my brother used to send me money—small amounts, of Rs 300 or Rs 400.1 would write letters to my family and call them using some of that money, while the rest would usually be spent on food and stuff. The fact that I was eventually building an image of my own and identity for myself using this game as a medium made me more passionate about cricket. We would save money on our laundry (the rest of the kids would give their clothes to this man called Anand bhai). And with that money, we would go watch a match at a nearby stadium.

I remember watching the Sheesh Mahal tournament a couple of times in Lucknow. Navjot Singh Sidhu played very well in one of these matches. Back then, Pakistani players would also come and play in that tournament.

It was all a learning process. You learn to value money when you

don't have much of it, which prepares you to value it even more when you have it. I remember the first time I got a Rs 10,000 scholarship, which felt equivalent to Rs 10 crore to me back then. It was quite a special feeling to be able to earn more than my father, who had provided for me for a long time. Out of that Rs 10,000,1 would always send Rs 2000 home.

All this never changed the dynamics between Papa and me in terms of money. Whatever money I would earn, he would not let me give it to him. He would ask me to save it. In 1998, my father gave me a bat, which cost around Rs 1800, and I still have that bat with me. He would always keep saying, 'You keep the money for

buying your sports gear. That's way more important.'

Around the years 2000-01,1 used to get Rs 2000-5000 for the matches I was playing. Life started improving a bit, as we could now eat at a better dhaba than before and could fulfil our basic needs.

The coaches at the sports hostel were all very supportive and guided us well. They made us buy proper half-spike shoes. Reebok was a very popular brand then. Whatever kit we bought, we made sure we used it till it went completely out of shape and couldn't be used any more. Even at that young an age, one learnt the concept of spending wisely. I remember our coach, S.R Krishnan, had given me his son's gloves when mine had been completely torn and even the cobbler couldn't save them.

The first time I saw a proper contract was when I went to play for Air India in Mumbai in 2005. Since my ultimate goal was never to make money but to play cricket at the highest level, I never welcomed my earnings with any special glee. I played well, hence I earned. That's how I looked at it. I even bought a handbag for my

sister with my first pay.

Robin Singh and Dilip Vengsarkar Sir were the two people who supported me throughout my training period. And our team was also one of the best at the junior level, with players like Irfan Pathan and Ambati Rayudu. We once went to play in Delhi as part of the junior India team for the Air India tournament, where I took V.V.S. Laxman's wicket and took a great catch to get rid of Vijay Dahiya. It was after watching my performance there that Praveen Amre Sir called me to Mumbai. There's no better city in India to learn about money than Mumbai.

There was a Sai Baba temple in Mumbai, which all the cab and auto drivers originally from UP would visit, and I would go there too. Naman Ojha and I were roommates, and we would go out to eat at times. But I always kept an eye out for Papa and his finances to see if I could somehow convince him to accept some money from me.

Papa had some land that he had bought in Muradnagar for Rs 20,000. He was still paying the EMIs for it. It got me thinking back to my hostel days, when Papa would give my older siblings Rs 1000 each, while I never got more than Rs 300 or Rs 400. It wasn't that he didn't want to give me more money, just that he couldn't afford to send any more to me. But what stood out for me, and it's something that I will never stop being grateful for, was how he would make sacrifices whenever I needed money.

Like that time when my shoes were completely torn and I had a tournament to play in. My dad didn't say anything to me. It was my brother who got the shoes—he had brought them himself, to Lucknow station. I still don't know how Papa managed to send them, but he did. For me, that sums up my father's character and my entire fam-

ily's love for me. I am where I am because of them.

3

Overcoming the Bullies

My mother would cry every time she received a letter from me. She wasn't educated like my dad was. But she was closer to me than he ever could be. I remember how concerned she was when I had gone for a full medical check-up, a prerequisite once you have been selected at the Lucknow Sports Hostel. They had made a record of even the tiniest of details—like the number of marks and moles on my body. They did it so that later if something were to happen to me, they would have my entire medical history. However, she had no clue about this. For her, this was her son being put through some kind of ordeal.

My mother is Himachali. There are two kinds of Punjabis—one from Pakistan and the other from the Indian side. The ones from the Pakistani side are hardcore Punjabis, and their dialect is quite different from the Hindi-fused Punjabi spoken on this side of the border. At my home, everyone speaks the *pind waali* (Pakistani) Punjabi. In fact, initially, Priyanka found my mother's language very confusing. I used to ask her to keep me on speaker whenever they spoke on the phone, to help her out. But she has improved a lot now. My mother tongue is Himachali. But even in Himachal, they speak in Punjabi. And since most of us have been born and brought up in Murad-nagar, we hardly knew any Himachali and were more used to conversing in Punjabi.

My mother has always been the sweetest person I know. She is also very sensitive, especially when it comes to me, the baby of the house. When I was in hostel, she missed me a lot. Initially, I would

house. When I was in hostel, she missed me a lot. Initially, I would write to my parents very regularly. After a point, though, Dad asked me to stop addressing letters to her. I continued writing, but I would skip the emotional parts to prevent her from crying. Mom found it difficult to believe that I hardly addressed her in my letters. She would keep asking Dad about it, until he himself started writing the letters to keep her happy.

For a long time, she didn't find out anything about what I'd been through at the hostel or how I'd been treated. Then, one day, she found my personal diary lying around and started going through some of the incidents I had described. She was completely heartbroken and shattered. She basically felt helpless that she hadn't been there for me, that she couldn't protect me from all that evil and the hardships that her little boy had to endure far away from home. It was an important lesson for me.

How much of your bad experiences in life should you share with your parents or even your partner? It's a tricky one. In life, we often hide these things from them in order to prevent them from getting hurt. But eventually, they might end up getting hurt even more if they find out the truth by themselves. Maybe the secret is to realize that your pain is their pain too, and that it's best to share it.

It was a habit of mine back then to maintain a diary. My friends advised me to do so, and hence I started maintaining a journal of sorts, in which I would jot down my experiences daily. I wrote in Hindi: everything that happened through the course of the day, the things I learnt, the things I had to face, and the like. And this actually helped me keep busy. Most of my focus was on the game—especially on the batting techniques I had used, learnt or been praised for. And then it just so happened that while writing those thoughts down I would also add some bits about what I had eaten, having fun with my friends and stuff of that kind. This became a

having fun with my friends and stuff of that kind. This became a part of my routine for my entire first year in college.

Slowly, I also started writing about the not-so-good parts, about being away from home and living in a hostel. As the youngest in the family, I always received a lot of care from everyone. It isn't easy for any kid that age to be away for so long. And it wasn't just me. A lot of kids at our hostel had come out of their homes and were staying away from their families for the first time, which was a big adjustment in itself. And then, to have your seniors treat you that badly was just unforgivable. Some couldn't handle the ragging—it got too much for them, coupled with the homesickness. And I was always the prime target.

Seniors would especially target the juniors who were good at studies and sports, as I was. They would keep assigning work to me or try various other tricks just to annoy me. But I always kept my cool. I had no other choice. We had to prepare the pitches and put up the wickets on the field in the morning, after which the juniors also had to water the fields and the gardens around. In the afternoon, the juniors had to bunk classes to go set up the pitch and the wicket for the evening sessions. If for some reason the pitch wasn't ready on time, the seniors would punish us—making us stand for hours in the field with hands in the air, or making us crouch and hop around like a chicken. I was always the main victim of all this ragging, which was prevalent in those days.

Owing to my family background, I was really good in academics. And I also knew my game very well. Thus, the teachers and coaches always liked me. Moreover, I used to play well in school, so no one could ever point a finger at me regarding my cricket.

Ragging happens in every school, but it varies from place to place. In some places, it is done just for fun, while in other places it gets

very serious, with the freshers even getting beaten up. If you ask me, ragging should obviously be banned, especially at hostels in places like Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the general environment in itself is aggressive.

Youngsters who go there to play sports face similar challenges. Senior players get juniors to do their chores and subject them to other forms of ragging (pouring water over them and stuff like that). All this is common in hostels, given that the under-14, under-16 and even under-19 players are very young, and there is this constant sense of competition that hovers over the heads of the seniors whenever these players come in.

If one of the juniors got beaten up or something, that was when the newcomers took it up as a challenge and began to answer back. Fighting it out, with your own group, was the only way to survive. You had to show them that you were there to study and play. I come from a family that is really calm and quiet and believes in resolving fights through words not actions. And this has really helped me. Back when I first arrived in the hostel, I had never seen anyone fight. So, coming from such a background and adjusting to the new normal, was definitely a challenge. The key was to maintain solidarity among your peers.

* * *

I remember my first day at the hostel. There were fifteen kids, including me, who had gone through the selection round. We then had to go through medical tests, physical test, followed by flexibility and eye tests. Thus, one week was spent in all this, and those who failed were replaced. Then we met the principal, who told us what all was expected of us. From among those who were at the hostel, only two or three would be selected for playing with the

hostel team ultimately. Neeraj—who went on to become one of my closest friends—and a few other boys joined our gang. Our batch had kids from various backgrounds and different parts of the state. The athletics guys generally came from Pratapgarh, Rae Bareli, Gorakhpur and Azamgarh.

Neeraj and I were from neighbouring towns, half an hour apart. As kids, we had met at local tournaments. So our getting selected for the hostel at the same time was just meant to be. There were three of us from our region; the third member of that group, a Sikh youth, has passed away unfortunately.

Cricket was everything to me. While playing, I learnt a lot about life in general. And for me, my game was of the utmost importance, even though most of my family members were highly educated, including both my brothers, who had done higher studies and had a couple of degrees (one of them had started tutoring students). My dad always used to tell me that no matter how important the game was to me, I needed to keep studying as far as I could. And things got real when we had to take a loan to send me to sports college. He was hell-bent that I continue my education, whereas I was taking admission in the college primarily due to my cricketing potential. Even Mom would emphasize the importance of studying and learning new things. That was why I completed by BA graduation from Lucknow University— I knew they wouldn't give me full permission to play till I finished a basic level of education. Deependra Pandey and I were the only two who had passed from our batch. I knew that for all my success as a cricketer, my parents would not have been pleased if I'd ignored my education. I'm so thankful to them for that. You don't often realize the importance of education as a cricketer till you've retired.

Before going to the hostel, from Murad-nagar to Ghaziabad was the

maximum distance I had travelled by myself. So, moving to a completely different city for the sake of cricket was quite an important decision in my life. The initial months were great since I was getting to play every day. But eventually, as the days passed and the uglier side of the hostel life started to emerge, things changed. Day in and day out, I had to bear the ragging as well as complete my chores while sticking to a particular schedule—it all became really challenging. Even when you are playing, you often tend to get lonely at such places. Especially on Fridays, when most of the students would leave for their homes and I would be the only one staying back since it took a two-day train journey for me to visit home. They would then return with home-cooked food, and that would upset me. Eventually, I started travelling home as well, using the train passes that a few of my friends, who were from Banaras, had got for themselves; the train tickets were expensive.

At the hostel, you learnt about the different regions of UP through the people you met there.

I was born in UP. All my documents showed that I was from there. However, my father was from Kashmir and mother from Himachal. When I joined the hostel, I had slightly brownish hair and was really fair. My game was already developing nicely, and I was good at studies. As Neeraj likes to say, I went there as a 'mini package'. The problem was that a lot of students there came from the UP-Bihar border areas. Their mindset was extremely different from mine. Most of them, I think, were driven by a jealousy factor and had deep-rooted insecurities. In their eyes, perhaps, I was an outsider.

Hostel life consists of routines and more routines. At some level, it's tough to not get institutionalized and resist having your life embedded into those patterns. We had a pretty strict schedule at

the hostel, one that we all had to follow religiously. For me it went like this. Wake up, get ragged, sing the national anthem, practise, have breakfast, go for the classes, lunch, practise again and get ragged. And so it would continue. That was my routine.

Our principal would meet us at the morning assembly every day at 6 a.m. Before that, the hostel siren would ring at 4 a.m. to wake us all up. The accommodation for all students on campus was divided based on age groups and also on the basis of different sports. Those who were there for football and hockey would be on some floor, while the athletics gang would be on another. We, the cricket group, were on the fourth floor. There would be tea for us on the ground floor every morning.

It wasn't just the hostel routines that we had to follow diligently; there were also those laid down by the seniors. Every morning, regardless of whether it was raining or freezing cold, the seniors would keep all their mugs under my bed, with orders that they needed the tea to be delivered to their rooms personally by me, before I could get a cup for myself. I was eleven or twelve, and I would go up and down the stairs a number of times to make sure that all of them had received their cups of tea before 4.30 a.m. If the tea wasn't there on time, they would rag me again or beat me up, at times with hockey sticks.

Post breakfast, we would have our first practice session of the day, which would be followed by school. We would then return to our rooms for a couple of hours before setting out for the evening session of cricket practice. The break in between was for us to rest or finish our homework or just sit and study. But I wouldn't get much time to do any of that. The seniors would throw all their dirty clothes either on my bed or next to it in our dorm. It was my responsibility, they had decided, to get their laundry done every

day. And like with everything else to do with them, I had no choice but to get it done.

Our evening practice would finish around 7-7.30 p.m. We had to walk to the ground, which was on campus. During that time, we would be given one glass of milk and one banana every evening to nourish ourselves with. The seniors would go and grab their share at the very beginning, while we would usually be late since there was a lot to wrap up and carry back from the field—that was our job too.

I especially had a lot to do after the practice sessions, from clearing up to even taking the nets down. By that time I would get done, the seniors would have not only finished most of the milk but also contaminated whatever little was left, using grass, dead insects, mud or whatever they got their hands on. Basically, I then had to choose between either doing something about it or going hungry. That was when I started making sure I always filtered the milk using a muslin cloth before drinking the few millilitres left.

We would sit at the end of the table during both meals of the day. The chapatis or rotis or whatever else would be served beginning from the other end, the head of the table. First the coaches, then the seniors and then us, the juniors—that was the sequence. So, we would usually get the moist rotis from the bottom of the pile. We couldn't complain about all that. We didn't have nutritionists at the Lucknow Sports Hostel, nor was there any great emphasis on providing high-level nutrition.

Our meals were somewhat like this: they would serve tea at four in the morning; then we would get breakfast comprising sprouts, milk, bread, eggs; lunch would be north Indian food; around evening, we would be given milk and banana; and dinner would be chapati and dal or some paneer dish. The Parle-G biscuits were

chapati and dal or some nonveg dish. The Parle-G biscuits were definitely a lifesaver for us at that time, but we had to be careful while holding on to them.

I wasn't the first or the only kid to be subjected to that level of ragging at the hostel. But I was certainly the favourite to be picked on. To an extent, I understood where the seniors' animosity towards me came

from. I was the kid on the first bench. I was good at studies. My reputation as a cricketer was growing fast. The professors and teachers liked me. My name was always doing the rounds owing to some innings I'd played or some catch I'd taken.

You have to understand the dynamics of a sports hostel to get an idea of why I was targeted. Most of those in the athletics group came there with one major goal—to get a government job through the sports quota. And then there was me, getting all this attention from not just the cricket coaches but also from everyone else in general. For them, I was a threat. This was their future on the line. Their livelihood and, in most cases, their families depended on their success. They saw me as a major obstacle, one that had to be eliminated.

In addition, I was the one who never answered back, no matter how much they ragged me. I would get frustrated, and that would show in my practice and game. This would annoy the seniors further, since they couldn't pick on me there. On the field, they were often no match for me.

They would otherwise just find reasons to pick on me. On the odd day, I would have icy cold water splashed on my face, at 3.30 a.m. This wasn't punishment. This was torture. Then there were other small things they would keep ragging me for, like being late for

dinner or not having watered the garden, etc.

You may be wondering why none of the professors or teachers did anything about this. But back then, ragging wasn't considered a major issue. All these incidents easily went unnoticed. For many, it wasn't a big deal. At times, it happened very much in front of their eyes: when, for instance, the seniors would unnecessarily make us mow the lawn or cut the grass on the coldest of winter nights. Nobody did anything about it. Nor did we complain to anyone. That would only have meant putting ourselves in greater peril.

When the seniors couldn't find a way of torturing us, they gave us really physically challenging tasks and would then punish us on the grounds that we hadn't done a satisfactory job. The punishments could range from standing for hours while holding a very heavy piece of wood over your head or *murga banna* (doing sit ups while imitating a chicken), after which we would still get beaten up with hockey sticks.

Initially, I had thought that giving it back was the best way, but then I realized there was no point in doing that. It was a very vital lesson for me in life. The best way to deal with a bully often is not to give it back to him or her in their style, but to do it your own way. For me, it meant directing my aggression towards the game and giving it back to the seniors through my game on the field. I didn't believe that going around discussing my mindset with my peers was the way out. Instead, I sweated it out more than anyone else on the field during our practice sessions or even otherwise. I would finish a 100-metre sprint in 12-13 seconds. Whenever I was free, I would go out on the field and start exercising and running—even in the afternoon, when it would be blazing hot, with the sun right over one's head.

I never cried or broke down. We couldn't tell our parents about what was going on either. We anyway couldn't talk to them a lot since the *PCO* (public phone) was really far from the hostel. And we had to take permission from the seniors to go and make calls, which was allowed only on weekends. We wouldn't always get our parents on the phone; so we often had to speak to the neighbours instead. Moreover, the seniors would be lurking outside the PCO, monitoring and eavesdropping, and then ragging us based on that later. We couldn't hint at anything or even be suspected of having slipped a word about the ragging to anyone outside. There were dire consequences for that.

At times, I could see that Neeraj and a couple of my other friends wanted to help. But the thing was that if one of us spoke up, the entire batch would get beaten up. It was clear that the seniors wanted me out of the way. To keep it subtle, they would go around ragging and beating up the other boys in my group too, just so their objective didn't seem too obvious. They were a collective front who were out to get me. My group was united too, but mostly we were helpless and unable to stand up to those bullies.

On one occasion, though, I couldn't hold myself back and ended up retaliating in physical fashion. It was probably one of the worst incidents during my time at the hostel. It happened when we were travelling for a tournament to Agra by train. Often during an overnight journey, we would be sitting wearing our leg guards and all our gear to protect us from the cold. On that occasion, there'd been some confusion with the tickets. So a number of us didn't have seats. We had to make do with whatever space we got on the floor near the door to sleep. The seniors would torment us even there, by throwing their slippers and shoes at us the moment the lights went off.

That night, there was a bit of a squabble between me and a couple of bigger boys about them claiming that I was intruding into their space; they said they didn't have enough space to stretch their legs because of me. Then, as soon as the lights went out, one of them, this really big boy, sat on me and started urinating on my face. I just lost it completely. I pushed him off violently and landed a punch on his face. It almost knocked him off the train. That was the first and only time I reacted in this fashion. I was just thirteen at that time.

Looking back, I think I could have gone about it differently. But in that moment, I saw no other choice but to express my disgust and displeasure in the most extreme fashion. I also had to be careful. Some of those athletics guys were known to sleep with a revolver or gun next to them.

In a way, though, I am glad I stood up to that fellow. There were some in our group who got severely affected by everything they had experienced at the hostel. There was a boy called Kunal Chatterjee, who was so shaken by it all that he threatened to jump off the fourth-floor balcony. Neeraj and I had to pull him back; we asked him to calm down and told him that we would protect him. Things went that bad at times.

It was ironic how, despite having suffered most at the hands of the seniors, I had to be the one counselling the members of my group and saving them from taking any drastic steps. I would talk to them and ask them to be calm and not pay any attention to the seniors and their antics. I had to set an example for the other juniors.

I did so on the field as well. I started performing really well. I was a little boy standing up to the big fast bowlers, who were generally part of the bullying group; I hit them for boundaries and sixes, and made them look not so impressive in the nets. It eventually

transformed their behaviour towards me, to the extent that they even started buttering me up once they realized that I had the potential to rise and shine. But that was to happen much later.

As mentally strong as I thought I was, even my nerves couldn't handle all that

stress after a point. I broke down. I couldn't do it anymore. I had to leave. And I did.

* * *

By class nine, the ragging had reached an extreme level for me. I remember going to one of my friends, Vikas Paliwal, and asking him to help me pack since I was going home. I had told nobody else except Neeraj. But even they didn't know my plan was to leave and never come back. We were just approaching our Diwali vacation at that point. I made up a story about how there was this important function coming up in the family, something to do with my sister, and that I needed a longer break than usual because I had to attend it.

You see, winter was approaching then, which meant things would get worse. I had been using the same unwashed quilt for the past four years, the one on which seniors had spat paan masala. There had also been this incident: a senior had called me some name and cussed me for being from the Meerut area. I didn't get what he was saying so I said, 'I am sorry, I can't understand what you are labelling me as.' I got beaten up for that, and the entire class got punished by them. The atmosphere had become too vile. I couldn't stand it any more.

When the family function excuse didn't work, I tried feigning an illness. I said I wasn't doing too well and that I would have to go

home a few days before the vacations officially began. However, in a match that we played soon after, I took a brilliant catch dismissing one of the seniors. That's when the coach called me and asked me why I was lying about my health when I was actually in such great shape and taking remarkable catches. I just tried to underplay the thing and said it was no big deal.

I still insisted that I wanted to go home since I wasn't being able to concentrate there. But the coach kept rejecting my request to leave. So I paid one of my seniors to drop me till a certain point and took off by myself. The only person I had told later was Neeraj; I had given him my number, asking him to inform me if things went south at the hostel. However, he couldn't do that, as he was beaten up by the seniors because of me—they were scared that my disappearance would get them into trouble. This was how I had planned and executed my escape: I had packed everything and made a run for it.

Our sports college was on the outskirts of the city. The highway there was narrow and flanked by forests. So whenever we had to visit the city to get our sports equipment, we had to hitchhike our way there. Rarely did we get lucky and catch a bus. On the day of my escape, I hailed a truck and the driver let me in. But a few minutes later, I was alarmed by his demeanour and the fact that he refused to stop in Meerut. Here was this chikna ladka all by himself, with three grown men inside a truck. I somehow man-

aged to chuck my bags out at a toll booth and jump out, and then I just kept running. Luckily, they didn't make any attempt to follow me.

I then walked to the closest railway station and found a train that dropped me off in Muradnagar. It was still a 5 km walk home, but I wasn't complaining. I finally felt safe.

wasn't complaining. I finally felt safe.

Of course, I hadn't informed my parents that I was coming back for good. They were a little surprised to see me. When Mom saw all my stuff, she inquired about it, and I just told her that I was back on a holiday and thought I could get a few extra clothes for the upcoming winter. It was only after a good 10-20 days that they started asking me when I was returning to the hostel. I would not say anything.

When they received a letter from the hostel informing them that I had been absconding, I told them the truth about hostel life. Mom became emotional; both she and my sister decided that I was not returning. I couldn't go out of my house too. I was embarrassed and worried about what people would think of me and about the consequences it would have on my family.

My father was very upset with me. He had taken a loan to send me to the hostel. They had made sacrifices to make sure that my dream came true. And here I was, back home, having lied to the hostel authorities. My father was insistent that I return to the hostel. His point was, you can't run away

from troubles in life; you have to stand up and face these challenges head-on.

The letter my parents received from the college said that since they had spent so much money in grooming me, my family had to repay them some amount if I wasn't going back to represent them. That's when my big brother Dinesh and my dad tried convincing me to go back.

The turning point was when S.P. Krishnan Sir, my cricket coach, himself came all the way to our place to speak to my parents and

explain the whole scenario to them. When Krishnan Sir heard about everything I had been through, he too was very shocked and upset. He assured my parents and me that I would never have to face anything of that nature ever again, and that he would see to it that I was safe. It also opened his eyes towards all the terrible things the seniors were doing to us.

My elder brother was very supportive; he came to drop me at the hostel. Neeraj and everyone else was so happy to see me. I hadn't done it probably the way I should have, but, fortunately, I had made a statement. It changed not only my life at the hostel but also the way bullying and ragging was looked at by the officials there. They finally acknowledged it as a major issue if not an offence—and that they needed to come down heavily on the offenders.

Once, Krishnan Sir went back after meeting my family and hearing my story, the hostel authorities put in place an investigation team to check who had done what in terms of the ragging complaints. But of course, no one volunteered to speak up against the seniors, and thus no one got punished. However, the teachers were now aware of what the seniors had been up to and became a lot more vigilant.

When I returned to the hostel, things began improving dramatically. It was a much-needed relief. The authorities had realized that talented kids shouldn't be in a position where they wanted to leave because of the ragging. The college was supposed to train and groom them. They understood that if the ragging wasn't stopped, there was no way that India would make any progress in terms of sports at least.

The recent developments had made a massive difference to me too. I became stronger and freer. My determination to prove everyone wrong or right, depending on which side of the fence they sat, only

wrong or right, depending on which side of the fence they sat, only grew. I decided that I wouldn't say a word against whatever people did, but my bat would speak for me on the field.

I never lost my smile either. Neeraj often laments about how difficult it is to find out exactly how I'm feeling at any given moment. He says that I always have a cheeky expression on my face, creating a certain sense of mystery, so that one never knows what I am thinking. While I don't do it intentionally, I'm glad that at least my closest friends think I am some sort of an enigma.

It was during that period of transformation that the seniors' attitude towards me also changed enormously. Some did it just out of the fear of being pulled up as those responsible for the ragging. But for many, it was more about the realization that I was there simply to achieve my goal of representing the nation. I could sense that their admiration was giving way to respect as I continued to perform better on the field.

The culmination of that turnaround for me at the hostel was my leading the team of juniors to victory over the same seniors. I was the best performer of the match. That really meant for me that the tide had turned for good.

Upon rejoining the hostel, I no longer needed a diary, since I had come back stronger. I think that old diary is still there at my parents' place somewhere. The seniors about whom I had written in the diary—the ones who used to rag me— soon started playing under my captaincy. Not that it mattered to me. On the field, my key focus was my performance. I never let anything distract me from that objective.

The most pleasing outcome of it all—my bad experiences at the hostel followed by my abandoning the ship—was how the seniors'

attitude towards the juniors changed in general. People became a lot more aware of the long-lasting impact of ragging on the victims. I could sense that the future batches of seniors, including Neeraj and my other friends, were so much more welcoming of the newbies. The Lucknow Sports Hostel became a place where kids came to play sports, get a decent education and pursue their goals, without the fear of ill-treatment and abuse that we had to endure.

* * *

As I mentioned earlier, our college was located in a secluded area. We hardly had any source of entertainment except the radio. We would only step out to buy the basic necessities. There was a tea shack nearby, where we went to update ourselves about the news and all that was happening around. Otherwise there wasn't much to be done there. We didn't have any TVs in rooms. Within the hostel, there was one TV room, but the seniors mostly used that. Very rarely would we all get to watch a cricket match together.

There was one senior named Mritunjay Tripathi, who played in the Under-19 World Cup in 2000. He was from Yuvraj Singh's batch. I remember having got the chance to watch the finals in the TV room, since Tripathi was a part of our college. He even took a wicket in that final, which was played against Sri Lanka in Colombo. That was the only time all of us sat together in the TV room and watched the same channel.

In our group, we always had fun when we were together. And I would invariably be leading the charge. We would listen to the radio together and sing along with songs playing on it. I always had an interest in singing, and Neeraj and others had to put up with me humming away in their ears all the time.

We hardly knew anything about the world outside the hostel at

We hardly knew anything about the world outside the hostel at that time. It was very different form today's generation; that was a way more innocent era. The only time we got to interact with the rest of the world was during the Holi and Diwali holidays. That was when we would get to see trains, roads, cars and even girls.

Apart from the radio and the TV room, the only other source of entertainment we had was the movie theatre nearby. Occasionally, we would sneak out and go watch a movie on Saturday nights. We did get caught a couple of times and were beaten up by seniors for this. But at least we got to see a movie before that.

It was not easy for us to manage our studies in that setting. Most of our time went in practising and attending classes. We would study quite late into the night and would get a day off right before the exams for preparation. I approached my studies with the same positive attitude that I had on the cricket field, though the levels of success I achieved in these two areas might not always have been the same. My favourite subject in school was maths even if it gave me quite a few nightmares.

I think those four years of college, living in the hostel, really groomed me and prepared me for the world outside. That struggle taught me discipline, made me mentally strong and prepared me for all situations. It's difficult to shake off the natural discipline that one imbibes in a hostel setting. You end up conditioning your body and mind in a certain way; you carry that discipline throughout your life and teach it to your kids.

Towards the end, I did not spend much time at the hostel, since I was getting picked for the junior state teams and then for the junior India teams. Before long, I was playing senior state cricket for Uttar Pradesh. My career had taken off. I even started getting a stipend from the college. Neeraj and I couldn't meet much at the hostel in

that period.

Recently, maybe a couple of years ago, I took the initiative and started a WhatsApp group only for my hostel friends. We often do group phone calls and speak about the good old (and at times bad old) days. It's a lot of fun. Neeraj and I continue to be close friends, and I meet him often. We are at each other's homes all the time.

I rarely bring up my experiences with ragging and bullying unless I think that by sharing them, I can spread some awareness and get people talking about it. It's really a menace that needs to be wiped out. If you are a victim, remember to not feel guilty; instead, make sure you stand up against it.

I am not sure what happened to the majority of those seniors who made life hell for me at the hostel. At times, I do bump into one or two here or there, and they're more than happy to chat. But I always get the feeling that they have conveniently forgotten what they did to us back in those days. It makes me smile everytime.

4

The Early Days

Even after I left the hostel, the hostel never left me. And I don't say this with any regrets. Hostel life comes with its discipline and routines, which become a part of your life. It all becomes a part of you. In some ways, you become what you are because of that life.

To this day, I am very conscious of being on time, being neatly dressed and even having my fingernails trimmed properly. I believe those early days have held me in good stead. They helped me become more professional in my life, my career and with my cricket. To the extent that I found it very difficult to share a room with a senior teammate early in my career, especially if it meant a break in my routines. I was picked for the Uttar Pradesh Ranji Trophy team a year before I represented the country in the 2004 Under-19 World Cup. I was barely a few months past my sixteenth birthday. It was a game against Assam in Guwahati, in February 2003.

This was back when none of the players got a single room, as is the norm with most state teams in India now. My first-ever roommate in first-class cricket was Nikhil Chopra. He was already a veteran by then and had played GDIs and a Test for India. He was very supportive of course, but our routines just weren't the same. And I eventually requested Gyanu Bhai (Gyanendra Pandey), who was captain, to shift me to another room.

Nikhil Bhai was a senior player, and I wanted to be among my peers

in the team, to be in touch with them and concentrate better on the game. I had to sleep early and wake up early as well. My body clock was still aligned to the hostel's schedule. So, I decided to check in with Tahir Abbas, who was around eighteen at the time, and another guy, even if it meant sleeping on a mattress on the floor. In fact, I asked the management to keep us junior players together during the Ranji Trophy.

It was not that the senior players weren't disciplined or that I didn't get along with them. It was just that their lifestyles were very different from mine. Understandably so too. They would want to hang around in someone's room and have a chat post dinner or play a quick round of cards or just have a good time. But all I wanted to do was sleep. My body would shut down automatically at bedtime.

They were all mostly at least 10-12 years older than me. I was extremely shy and reserved. On the field, you wouldn't find a more confident person, but off it, I was still not open enough to be able to speak to the seniors directly. Gyanu Bhai, though, was amazing in the way he welcomed me into the mix and made me feel very comfortable. It was something that I picked up very early from him. It was a lesson in how you should go about allowing a young player to feel at home within the dressing room and the team atmosphere. I've followed it to this day. These days, you'll find that I am often the one in charge of initiating young players into the set-up, whether it's at the Chennai Super Kings or at Uttar Pradesh.

Back to that game in Guwahati. It was my first-class debut. I was barely out of school, and here I was rubbing shoulders with guys who had played for India and with domestic legends like Rizwan Shamshad and Ashish Winston Zaidi. I had by then played in a handful matches for India Under-19 and made a tour of England in late 2002. It was a big call the state selectors had made to push me

in so young. And you know how we play cricket in UP. It is very much the school of hard knocks. There is a lot of tough love, and the team plays every game with a take-no-prisoners approach. You grow up pretty fast in that atmosphere. I certainly did.

In my debut game, I made some runs, 22 and 40, though I got bowled pretty early on in the first innings. I didn't play again for the senior team that season. But Gyanu Bhai didn't give up on me. He told me to keep my chin up and keep working on my game. At times, that's all you need as a youngster: for someone you look up to as a mentor to slip in a quiet word of encouragement.

From that point on, I spent most of 2003 playing junior cricket, including the Asia Cup with the India Under-19 team. I was recalled to the Ranji side for the 2003-04 season. And Gyanu Bhai kept in touch with me throughout. The one thing he admired about me was my discipline and focus on the game. He would make it a point to help me during practice whenever he had some time off. And then my dream came true when I had my first long partnership with my captain in first-class cricket.

It was against Andhra at the Green Park Oval in Kanpur. The ball was moving around. We had been reduced to 43/4 after electing to bat first. It was up to Gyanu Bhai and me to drag the team out of trouble. And we did that with a partnership of 181 runs. He was the one who took charge and played quite a sensational innings in those conditions. Unfortunately, he was dismissed for 97, a knock that included five sixes. He wasn't around in the middle when I made my maiden first-class century. But I owed my success that day to him.

There was a phase in the match when Syed Sahabuddin, another domestic stalwart, was moving the ball around, and I wasn't

looking comfortable against him. Gyanu Bhai made it a point to shield me from Sahabuddin and took on the challenge himself. That again taught me a lot about batting in partnerships. It's not always about what you're doing at your end; sometimes, it's vital that you also bat for your partner at the other end. It's the same in life. You can't always just keep working towards your success. There are times when you need to take a break from that and give someone else a hand or at least try to shelter them when they are not looking their best, regardless of what you're doing in life. I don't know whether I would have survived that spell from Sahabuddin that day if not for Gyanu Bhai, and maybe that first century might not have happened. I am still so grateful for the way he protected me as a senior player that day.

* * *

While we were in the hostel, playing for the state was obviously our first goal. The ultimate dream, of course, was to represent your country. But you don't start thinking about it at that stage. You're still taking it one step at a time. There are times in cricket, both on and off the field, when you can get a little desperate and want to rush things. However, there's a process to everything in life, and it's really up to you to stay on track rather than trying to overtake someone or trying to skip past a step or two. It is true what they say: you need to learn to walk before you start running. If you're dedicated and true to your ambitions, then nobody can stop you. But just a word of advice: breathe, take it easy and follow the process.

The next step for me was to attend the UP selection trials and make my way into the junior teams. I went on playing the sports college matches and tournaments, besides coping with the academic pressure, since I had to live up to the expectations of my aca-

demics-oriented family.

We would have trials before the Ranji Trophy season for the under-16s. The sports college sent some fifteen players for this, while the rest came from various parts of the state, mostly from Lucknow. There were dormitories where we would stay. Our hostel gave us Rs 40 as daily allowance —with which we had to eat, clean up and look after all other essentials. Even that was enough for us back then and seemed like a big amount.

The trials I am talking about were nothing like a scene you might have witnessed on a maidan in Mumbai or Delhi. These were very different. You had thousands of kids from various districts showing up at this ground. Some with their parents, some without. There were many who come from the farmlands, along with their entire family, having left their fields unguarded. Everyone was there hoping that his or her son would somehow make it through to the junior state team. Most saw it as their first step in cricket that would change their lives forever. Back in my youth, most young cricketers came to get selected into the state teams, and if nothing else at least to use that platform to get a government job through the sports quota. Still, in some ways, it was more about cricket than it is now. Things are crazier these days, thanks to the Indian Premier League.

So, at the trials, there were thousands of kids, and as a batsman all you got to face at times were five balls. On that basis alone, they selected 25-30 players. Bowlers often turned up with their specially prepared cricket balls. There was no checking as to what they might have used to get the ball in the right condition so they could swing and seam it around. The coaches would instruct those net bowlers to bowl at full pace while moving the ball around. It was some of the toughest bowling you would have faced at that age, at least for

the majority of the kids.

Half of them would just back off the moment the bowler approached the bowling crease for fear of getting injured. Many aspirants would try using some sort of influence to get their slots after the lunch break, since by that time the bowlers would get a bit tired and the batsmen would be required to face fewer balls. So, fewer chances of getting out and, more importantly, of getting hurt.

When I had my under-16 trial, I had already played for the under-14 team. As a result, they called me separately and asked me to bat for a good 10-15 minutes. They asked me to bat in specific styles as well. After which they told me that I had already been selected and that I didn't need to go through the rest of the rounds during the trial.

So, for the next two days I sat back and witnessed the trial rounds. It gave me a glimpse of just how much some families and players in UP were willing to sacrifice to make their future in cricket. There were so many physical endurance tests that these aspirants were put through. Some of them might have not eaten, others might not have slept. There would also be some rich kids there in their fancy cars, some even being tended to for everything by their servants or drivers. The selectors' phones would keep buzzing throughout. From the expression on their faces, you could make out who might be on the line and whether the selector was acceding to their demands or requests. It was all fascinating. There were some boys who simply couldn't manage to even finish the 800-metre sprint challenges. You had to feel for them.

The entry fee for the selection trial used to be Rs 150. Some of the aspirants would re-enter the trials, several times, and ended up spending nearly Rs 1000. Others would give up and say that they would try next time. For those organizing the trials, it was often

would try next time. For those organizing the trials, it was often just a money-making exercise. UP's selection process could be quite disheartening at times. However, things have, fortunately, started changing ever since UP started winning titles. It's a state blessed with such talented players. It was just a question of channeling that talent. And it's great to see it happen. We've had so many come through that system and play for India.

When I look back now, I realize how privileged those of us who make it this far to the international level really are. The lesson is that with all the talent in the world, you also need some good fortune and a lot of other things to go your way. There's always so much to be thankful for in life.

At the UP trials, there were a few more boys who had been selected early along with me. We discussed how it would be to represent Uttar Pradesh at the senior level, while I told them about my experiences of playing at the under-14 level.

It was an important milestone for me, one that got me believing—that word again —in my own potential. Neeru Kapoor Sir, who was the UP chairman of selectors at that point, was the one who saw something in me the first time and gave me that extra ten minutes to bat in front of the other selectors and coaches. I would always be grateful to him for that, since there were like 1000 other kids and he gave me a chance to shine. Even when you reach the highest levels of the sport, there are always those people along the way who make what might in the long run seem like a tiny contribution, but its impact is often long-lasting, like what Neeru Kapoor Sir did for me that day. Of course, I had done my part as well. Leading into that selection trial, I had been performing quite well in local tournaments.

I remember the first time I had gone for a selection trial, and the time I went to get my picture clicked for the UP trial (the photo was needed for the application form). There was this white shirt I had been given for the photoshoot. It was a happy and proud moment for me, since I knew I was going for a photoshoot that would lead on the road to representing my state. We had this *tempo* (van) which had taken us there. Near the venue, there were these places to eat and a movie theatre.

I remember we had gone to play against a rival sports college team in Gomtinagar. The bus journey was a happy time for us (it was only for such trips that we got to leave the hostel during the four years of hostel life). Sometimes, Krishnan Sir used to take us on his scooter to play in the Sheesh Mahal tournament. R.P. Singh and I used to go with him, hauling our kitbags. We used to have chai at Sharma Ji's, and then he would do the coin toss right at the break of dawn so that the match could start early. This Lucknow team had approached me back then. We had a match at Aligarh, where someone had gifted me a bat and I scored quite a few runs with that. Back then, making 15-20 runs was a big deal too.

When I wouldn't get a chance to play proper games, I would go back to tennis-ball cricket. I never wanted to take a full break from the game. I don't think I ever have since I first picked up a bat. I remember a season where it kept raining for a fair while in Lucknow, and there was this company from Amsterdam that had laid AstroTurf on the hockey ground. Rahman Sir and Junaid Sir were among the two sports masters, the hockey coach and badminton coach, respectively.

We would go and do our fielding drills there. It was at that ground that I learnt how to slide on the field. We used to practise there till midnight (at times well past it too), after they'd left the sprinklers

on for a few hours. We would bounce tennis balls off the surface to practise our catching. Or we would bounce them off the cement surface on the sidelines. The purpose, of course, was to improve our reflexes and get better at taking those catches where the ball is flying at you. It was a lot of fun.

To make up for the lack of proper cricket, we also got permission to play six-over matches on the AstroTurf. We couldn't even use the nets, since they had no covers to protect them from the rain. Of course, the best part was what would follow the games—garma-garam jalebis and samosas in the rain. It was a dreamy setting.

Again, these were lessons in life. You can't always sit around complaining about not having the best resources or the facilities to train yourself for success. At times, it's best to make do with whatever you have or to improvise within the limitations. There's no room in a successful person's life for complaints. It's true for all those who reach the highest levels of their respective fields across the board.

At times, we would travel to and play games in nearby towns and villages. It was at one such game that I first came across a very dangerous swing bowler named Praveen Kumar. And I knew even then that PK would have quite a career in cricket. I was so right. I remember facing him in Meerut. He was lethal and quite a challenge with the leather ball. What also stands out in my memory of that trip is how their team had a full kit, with some really good bats. Meerut, after all, is the hub of bat production. When you saw their team approaching the grounds, it was almost as if the national team was coming to play—well equipped. Well, at least one of them did go on to play for the national team.

* * *

The next major step in my progress as a cricketer was the 2004 Under-19 World Cup. Another milestone for me. I had donned the national colours already at that stage. But there's nothing like doing so at a World Cup.

I've had a teacher at every step who left a long-lasting impact on different facets of my game. I spoke about Gopal Sharma Sir and Gyanu Bhai, who nurtured me and also taught me the aggressive approach to cricket.

The great Erapalli Prasanna Sir taught me bowling when we went for our under-17 tour to Sri Lanka a few months before my Ranji Trophy debut. Imagine listening to him talk about off spin and his experiences of bowling at the highest level. It was simply something else. And then to get Robin Singh's call after being picked in the World Cup squad! The former all-rounder was the coach of that team. He was similar to me in terms of giving everything out there on the field when he played. And he was among the best fielders in the Indian set-up during his playing days. He has since become a well-respected coach around the globe. But back then, it was still early days for him in that role. But you could already see the dedication and intensity he brought to the role.

There had been some talk of me being named the captain of that team. But since Ambati Rayudu already had a lot more experience than me, and had even already played for India A, he was given the nod. We had a few warm-up games against Australia in Kolkata before leaving for Bangladesh. It was a good Aussie team, too.

Tim Paine, the current Test captain, and Callum Ferguson, who too went on to represent his country, were the openers in that team. I got runs and wickets. I remember Faiz Fazal and Piyush Chawla had done well too on the previous tours. Faiz was in the World Cup

squad as well.

We did really well at the tournament. Shikhar was on fire with the bat. Dinesh Karthik, Robin Uthappa and I played some crucial knocks. Unfortunately, we lost to Pakistan in the semi-final. But a lot of us had made a name for ourselves during that tournament.

Dinesh Karthik and I were roommates during that World Cup. We used to watch match highlights together. Then in the evening, we would sit and watch some Hindi movie on TV, and I realized that he would always laugh when I was laughing. So I asked him if he could understand what was going on in the movie, to which he replied, 'No I am just laughing because you do.' That was classic DK. It's amazing that we are still going strong all these years later, and he's still as fit as ever.

DK, Rayudu and I formed quite a close bond. They had once come over to my place for lunch when we were in Delhi for a practice match. We had planned to go to Meerut to get our bats. And they had a good time conversing with my mom. She would repeatedly say to them, 'Go and win, beta? And at times they would look at me for translations.

The Under-19 World Cup is a crucial juncture in any young cricketer's career, especially in India. It can be a huge building block, but it also comes with its pressures. It was around that time that the tournament started being televised regularly, and you were on camera with the entire nation watching you. As a cricketer and as a person, you begin to learn a lot about yourself at that stage. Both about your strengths and your weaknesses. It's also the perfect springboard to get you in the reckoning for the national team. While you don't want to get too far ahead of yourself, it's good to recognize the platform you've been given and to make the most of it.

it.

If I recall correctly, a couple of players from Yuvi Pa's team in 2000 did make it to the Indian team eventually. As did Yuvi himself. Then there were Mohammad Kaif, Reetinder Sodhi and Ajay Ratra. As far as my batch goes, eight of us eventually made it to the Indian team, with Faiz playing an ODI in 2016 in Zimbabwe.

I guess the Virat Kohli batch had a few players who made it to the national team as well. And by the time Virat's team won the title in 2008, IPL had started too. Back in our days, the difference was that those who were playing under-19 had already played a lot of long-form cricket by the time they reached the first-class level. Rayudu and Karthik had already started playing regularly for their respective states, even some for India A. Irfan Pathan was from our batch, and he'd had a tremendous tour of England with the under-19 team in 2002; he ended up playing for India by the end of 2003 in Australia, making a massive first impression. Then you had me, V.R.V. Singh and RP get into the national team. After that, it was the turn of Piyush and Robin, who played against England in 2006.

Back on that under-19 tour to England, where Irfan came to the fore, we faced a lot of high-quality talent in the English team. Players like Liam Plunkett, Kabir Ali and Tim Bresnan were all really good, and it's no surprise that they went on to play for their country. Irfan already had a lot of hype around him. But I remember the likes of Paul Valthaty and Manvinder Bisla also getting runs during that tour. The English team had this really tall fast bowler, who was nearly 6'8", and he was a challenge for all of us. We had never faced anything like that before. He even injured one of our batsmen. I got some useful runs in the one-dayers, and we were able to draw the Tests 1-1. We couldn't have asked for a better preparation for when each of us got into our respective state teams. This was back when you would have a lot of big-name

teams. This was back when you would have a lot of big-name players playing quite a few matches in the Ranji Trophy and Duleep Trophy.

I remember facing Munaf Patel for the first time in first-class cricket. He was seriously quick. But having faced those quick bowlers in England, I was well prepared for Munaf. That's why I harp on how it's better for a young cricketer to pace himself or herself well and be happy with taking one step at a time when they start climbing the rungs towards international cricket.

The under-19 level is interesting. In my time, this was a step away from playing for your state for most juniors. I was fortunate enough to have made my debut for Uttar Pradesh at just sixteen. Things were very different from how they are now, when you see a lot of stars in the junior World Cup go for big money and become household names during an IPL auction. When you have a set-up like that, with loads of competitive teenagers all vying for spots at the higher levels, it can lead to some sort of friction or insecurity. Thankfully, that wasn't the case when I was starting out. I didn't look at it as competition anyway.

When you're representing your country, you have to look beyond yourself and your own ambitions. Yes, everyone there wants to do well and make a name for himself. But is that our ultimate goal? Isn't it to win the World Cup and bring honours to our nation? That attitude is so important to have in any team sport. The team's success is always the sum total of the players' achievements. It's important to have that kind of mindset in any team environment, not just in a sporting arena.

All the players in our team would turn up just to perform and give their best in the game, regardless of who was watching and who wasn't. Shikhar, Rayudu, Karthik and I were not preparing to

compete against each other but to get ourselves to do the best we could on the field.

There was this one match, in Nottinghamshire or Bristol, where I was batting. And the same tall English fast bowler was really giving me trouble, while some of the others seemed a bit more comfortable against him. But at the end of the day, all of us sat together and discussed how we should go about tackling him in the following games. It wasn't a case of, 'Oh Raina is having some issues against him, so it's good. It'll improve my chances.' Nobody thinks like that, and nobody should.

Back then, I used to play with Gautam Gambhir's club team as well. He was quite a fighter who would keep striving till we won the match. We would all get together and play table tennis. His approach was to never give up and always fight on, even at the table-tennis table.

So, whenever we would play in Delhi, he would advise me to do the same and be aggressive. If the opponent is aggressive, one has to be more aggressive than them. Honestly speaking, I was aggressive, but I always kept my calm. He was the kind who would put all his aggression into the game, so that the opponent could realize who they were playing against. Even I would channel my anger into the game, be it while batting or fielding. Yet I was slightly different from Gauti Bhai in this respect: you couldn't

make out how intense I was just by looking at me.

Those formative years of my career basically shaped me for the bigger tests that were coming up. As always, I believed I was good enough to take the next step. And thanks to that solid base, I also believed I was well prepared to do so.

5

Overseas Tours

The 2005 Ashes went down in history as one of the greatest Test series ever. Even now, people talk about it as being the most memorable contest, with so many performances that we'll never forget. I personally became aware of just how much the Ashes mean to Australians a few months prior to their team's departure for England in 2005. I was in the fortunate position of seeing them prepare for that tour from up close, at Australia's National Cricket Centre in Brisbane.

I had been selected alongside Shikhar Dhawan and Venugopal Rao for the 2004-05 Border-Gavaskar scholarship. Our names had been picked personally by the great Sunil Gavaskar Sir himself. Getting this scholarship meant a great deal to any young cricketer. Not only did you get to spend two quality months in Australia, you also got to learn a lot about the cricket culture down under.

Back then, the scholarship also served as a springboard for selection to the Indian cricket team. In a way, we were already there representing our country, since our trip was sponsored by the BCCI. We understood the significance of our time there. It was a massive privilege for us. Imagine having the honour of being able to carry the names of the great Sunil Gavaskar and Allan Border. I guess in many ways it enhanced our profile and our potential as future India players. Both Venu Bhai and I would go on to make our ODI debuts in the same match later that year, and Shikhar wasn't too far behind either.

Those afternoons when we got to watch Ricky Ponting and Co. train at the National Centre were among the biggest highlights of our time in Australia. We even got to interact with some of them, even if it wasn't much more than a 'hi, hello'. Seeing Ponting play those drives and pull shots from such proximity was awe-inspiring. As was to see how their coaches were getting the likes of Matthew Hayden and Justin Langer to prepare for the conditions they were about to face in England so many months before the tour. I also saw Brett Lee bowling in the nets and was amazed by his pace. Jason Gillespie, too, used to be so quick back then, and then there was Shaun Tait.

We learnt so much from that camp. We got introduced to their gym culture and learnt a lot of techniques in terms of how to get yourself fit as well as match-fit. Their fielding standards used to be at another level back then, and India was aspiring to reach those levels too. We did have some gun fielders like Yuvraj Singh and Mohammad Kaif playing for India. But that was around the time fielding culture was changing across India. For me, to witness how the best in the world trained and worked at it was another crucial element of that overall great experience.

Both Shikhar and I had come through the sports college system in north India, and we were used to working on our physical health. But we had no idea about the kind of fitness regimens that the Australians would put their players through. That was an eye-opener of a different kind for us and Venu Bhai. It was no longer just about being strong but also about making your body flexible and powerful in different ways. It wasn't all about gym work and adding muscle. I think it was during those two months that I really understood what it meant to be a professional in terms of maintaining your fitness.

It was also the start of a very close friendship between Shikhar and me, and it has remained the same even after all these years. He was from Delhi and I from UP, so we were both quite mentally tough. We were also friendly and loved talking to people. We were shy but not reserved. Venu Bhai was senior to us in terms of age. He had played quite a bit of domestic cricket and was already seen as an India player. He had been a part of Kaif Bhai's famous Un-der-19 World Cup winning side in 2000.

Shikhar and I had been together at the 2004 Under-19 World Cup earlier that year. He, in particular, had made quite an impression with his batting feats in that tournament. We got to know each other pretty well post that, but it was in Australia that we became the best of friends. Venu Bhai was different from us in terms of personality. He was a quiet guy, very religious and wasn't always keen on going out and exploring the place.

Shikhar and I stuck together as a result and started to learn a lot more about being in Australia and about how local cricketers thought and played. We managed a lot of it ourselves, with Venu Bhai playing guide and mentor. He would often talk to us about how we should soak the place in and explore as much of it as possible. Since he wasn't too keen on accompanying us always, Shikhar and I would make short trips out of the city, to places we could afford to travel to, of course. We would take a bus or a train and go around Queensland mostly.

This was before any of us had mobile phones. So, there was no contact with our family for many days. We would, however, try to get to this one shop from where we could make ISD calls to keep our families informed of our whereabouts. Sunday was generally reserved for that, if we didn't have a match to play. Sunday was also when we got our laundry done. I recall that the first few times

Shikhar and I had no clue how to operate the machine or even whom to ask for permission to use them. We would bank completely on Venu Bhai to help us out. We would quietly follow him around and follow his orders. It was funny how clueless we were back then about these essential things, especially overseas. Venu Bhai was often a lifesaver for us.

In those days, when we travelled, neither Shikhar nor I were very comfortable with the English language. I had already graduated from school and was in college. So I did know the language, but I found it intimidating to suddenly speak in English to Australians. In addition to that, comprehending the different accents was always a task. If you listen to an Australian accent, the words are so heavily drawn that it is difficult to understand unless you are used to it. The people who really helped us with that were some of the young Aussies in our camp.

Some of them, like Travis Birt, Jason Krejza and Tim Paine, even went on to play for Australia. Paine actually became a really good friend of mine. He used to call me Rahul because he always insisted that I looked like a young Rahul Dravid, which I always thought was an honour. Paine made our stay there so enjoyable. It was a great experience understanding Australia through his eyes. He would offer to take

us out to various restaurants and show us around whenever he could.

The best part was sitting around with Paine and the other Aussies and talking about life and cricket once the training sessions were done. We were encouraged to do so, and though it was a little awkward at first, Shikhar and I broke the ice soon enough and started mingling with them a lot.

I didn't drink back then as I was underage. So, we would usually be sipping cola, both Shikhar and I. However, we both would eat a lot. The cuisines mostly consisted of cold food. On training days, we would make do with whatever was offered to us. We were never the sorts who would complain about food. Don't forget, I had grown up in a hostel atmosphere.

However, we did find a messiah there. Azhar Bilakhia, who represented India at the Under-19 World Cup, was also there with us at the camp. He had family in Brisbane, and they would send homemade food in considerable portions, and we would all enjoy that. That used to be our treat back in the dormitories. Since we didn't earn a lot back then, we would usually be fine eating whatever was there in the vending machines. And Azhar's homemade food was a much-needed respite for us under those circumstances.

In the Gold Coast, Shikhar and I had made some local friends. As we had a craving for Indian food, we would constantly be on the lookout for a good source of that. We had also got our microwave by that time and would enjoy *theplas* (courtesy of Azhar's family) to our heart's content.

Food wasn't such an issue when I went to England a few months after returning from Brisbane. This was when Gyanendra Pandey, former India cricketer and my first UP captain, decided that I should go to England and play club cricket.

He was already a local legend in the Manchester area by then. For years, Gyanu Bhai had been playing in the Lancashire League, which features some of the best cricketers from the world. He had made a name for himself for a club called Todmorden. It was while we were playing in the Ranji Trophy during the 2004-05 season

that he came to me and said I should go and play cricket there. He even made contact with a club there, called the Astley and Tyldesley Cricket Club, which participated in the Bolton and District Cricket Association tournaments. I spent a month in England with Gyanu Bhai, and it was I believe a very important milestone in my life as a professional cricketer. This was at a time when I had absolutely no contact with bodies like the BCCI.

In England, once you are picked as a 'professional', you have to do it all, whether it's bowling, batting or fielding. The pitches in England, especially at the club-cricket level, are such that you constantly have to battle the elements. You'll show up one morning and there'll be dark clouds all over and batting will be extremely difficult. But everyone in the club is looking at you, the professional player, to put your hand up and win them the match. You're also rather involved with all the other aspects too. I would be at the club ground at 5 a.m., running around, doing my fitness drills and even helping the groundsman roll the pitch or with anything else he wanted done.

That experience helped enhance my skills as a cricketer, making me tougher and more nuanced in my thinking. It made me more professional and expressive with my on-field performance. And my luck was good, since former Australian cricketer and coach Trevor Chappell saw my performance in England and liked it. I was told that he passed on some really positive feedback to his older brother, Greg, who was at that point the head coach of the senior India team.

In club cricket, you are not just a player but become a part of their extended family. You are playing with a lot of cricketers who are not professional; it could be someone working in a pub nearby or as an accountant. So, as part of a such a team, you learn not just the skills of playing cricket in England but also about the larger culture

there, and you become an integral part of the entire fabric of the club. It was such a wonderful experience at the games. You have entire families show up at the ground and cheer for you. You become one of them.

You get accepted very quickly in England's club cricket culture.

Most of those players were paid 500 pounds weekly. I used to get 200 pounds at that time. Once I finished my level-two coaching there, they wanted me to coach their kids. This made me a bit apprehensive since I myself was a kid at that time. But level-two coaching was compulsory there to get and retain the relevant visa. So I coached them for five days, constantly guided by a set of prescribed protocols.

This was when I was still staying at the accommodation they had organized for me right above where the scoreboard used to be at our ground. But by that time, I had started feeling very lonely. So, I moved in with Gyanu Bhai, who lived in a two-bedroom flat near his club ground in Tod-morden. On weekends, we would go our separate ways, playing matches with our respective clubs; and then during the week, we would train together. We spent a lot of time in the flat or walking around, trying to find Indian food. Gyanu Bhai was a good cook, and I loved having home-cooked food during the week. He also had some friends in and around Manchester. So we would go to their homes to eat or just hang out. He was such an influential figure for me. I am not sure I would have been as comfortable as I was if he weren't around. I owe him a huge debt of gratitude for not only encouraging me to go there but also making it happen.

With time, of course, I became more and more comfortable with my teammates. I began bonding with them after the matches. At times, they even made sure we had Indian food in the clubhouse. That

they even made sure we had Indian food in the clubhouse. That made me feel so special. My captain, Chris Bullock, was a lovely guy. I remember reading an interview- a few years later where he said that 'eighteen-year-old Suresh Raina' was the best player he'd ever played with or against in club cricket. It was such a special moment for me. I played twelve matches and scored 644 runs at the average of 58.55, with two fifties and three centuries. I also took twenty-two wickets at an average of 23.18 apiece.

After one performance in particular, the club chairman's daughter came up to me and started talking about how well I was playing. Then another lady joined in. I was so shy I didn't know what to say. I quietly asked Gyanu Bhai to bail me out. Those were such innocent times.

I eventually had to cut short my stint with Astley and Tyldesley that season because I got selected for the senior India team camp that was to be held in Bangalore under coach Greg Chappell and captain Rahul Dravid. It just made my time there even more special. They were incredibly proud of my achievement and so was Gyanu Bhai. I did feel slightly bad about having to leave midway through the season, but the excitement of being picked for your country more than made up for it.

They were wonderful to me. A couple of months later, when I was picked to make my India debut on the tour to Sri Lanka, they sent me a letter congratulating me for getting my India cap and said that they were very hopeful I would come back and play for them. They even ran a report on the club website. They were so happy for me, and though I could never return, they would always ask me to come and join them at the clubhouse or to watch a match whenever I had time.

At that point, I had already spent a majority of my life in cricket

camps. When I was staying at the hostel in Lucknow, during my days at the sports college, my experience was extremely different, since the facilities there weren't really up to the mark. But then we travelled to England with the under-19 team as professional players, were put up at various universities there, played a lot of side matches with some of the best clubs in the country—that experience was extremely enriching, since it was our first exposure to international cricket. That changed my entire outlook towards how cricket is played and how cricketers prepare themselves for that level.

My experience in Brisbane was equally enriching. Indeed, my first trip to England and then to Australia—the first two overseas journeys—helped me realize that cricket was my true calling.

When I was included in the India camp in 2005,1 didn't feel out of place. I was now rubbing shoulders with many who had already played for India and were currently the biggest names in the sport. I felt like I could also play and represent my country after all the training programmes I had been through. It basically boosted my confidence.

If I compare the two experiences, I would say Australia was tougher when I look at it overall, while my time with Astley & Tyldesley in England was more professional. My stints in Australia and England, before I made it to the Indian team, will always be extremely close to my heart as they made me tougher and more professional, thus preparing me to play at the highest level. Such exposure can be a major leap in the transitory phase of any player's life, and I recommend it to every young player coming up the ranks.

6

The Dhoni Touch

I really can't pinpoint the exact moment when Mahi Bhai and I hit it off. Neither of us can recall a fixed date. It just happened. It was organic. I know people out there often say that our names are uttered in the same breath in Indian cricketing circles. For us, though, things just clicked the moment we met.

I remember when that was. I came across M.S. Dhoni for the first time during a Duleep Trophy match in Gwalior. It was February 2005, and I was representing Central Zone against East Zone, with Mahi Bhai as their wicketkeeper. He was quite a sight to behold. The long hair, the confident attitude, the self-belief and his hard hitting. He had already made his international debut at that point, having played three GDIs in Bangladesh. But he had not made much of an impact. Neither of us scored too many runs in the game at Gwalior, but he did take my catch behind the wickets in the first innings.

We had both come into the limelight the previous year. His rise to stardom came through his exploits for India A in that famous series in Nairobi. That was around the time I was in Australia for the Border-Gavaskar scholarship. We didn't get to interact much during that Duleep Trophy match. But in him, I saw someone very similar to me, someone I could relate with. He was shy and reserved when not on the field, just like me.

We met next at a senior Indian team camp in Bangalore. It was my first time being anywhere near the names I had grown up idolizing. Mahi Bhai was there too. And we bonded immediately. There were a

few others as well, like J.P. Yadav, L. Balaji, Irfan (whom I knew from my under-19 days) and Niraj Patel. We become a tight-knit group.

Mahi was the closest to me, though. We both came from small towns, we had similar family backgrounds and we were both sons of the soil. We liked desi things. And when you're away from home, it's natural to look for someone with whom you can share dil ki loaatein. Mahi Bhai was that person for me. From very early on, I could talk to him about anything. He's not a man of too many words, but he's a great listener and that helped strengthen our bond. We connected as cricketers and, more importantly, as friends.

We even started sharing rooms and would always be together for, say, embassy dinners or those social team events in the early days. We also were both terrified of fine dining back then. We always preferred going to food courts when overseas or to dhabas when in India. We felt a lot more comfortable there. The thing with fine dining is to know exactly how to use the spoon and fork, not to forget the different variety of knives. It was all too stressful. We would stick together and try and learn by looking at others. It's part of being an international sportsperson and representing your country. There are things expected of you not just on the field but off it too. Being presentable and following certain etiquette is all-important. Things like wearing a coat and going for embassy dinners. You can't just say that you know how to play all the shots and score runs for your country. How you handle yourself when not playing is equally important.

With time, you start getting more exposure, and your society and lifestyle changes. But at his heart, Mahi Bhai is still very desi. Whether it's the food or the breeds of dogs he likes, or the music he

listens to, he prefers Indian things. I am the same. We are also not much into *dikhava* (showing off). It's always more about keeping it simple and real.

I was heartbroken about missing the 2007 World Cup and the World T20 that followed. That event in South Africa, as we know, was the beginning of the M.S. Dhoni era in Indian cricket. We stayed in touch throughout that period, even as I continued to recover from a surgery. Rahul Bhai, Sachin Paaji and Mahi Bhai were the ones who were constantly in touch with me during that tough phase.

Even though Mahi Bhai was a superstar by the time we were back to sharing the dressing room again, our relationship stayed the same. His stock grew even more a few months later, when he led India to the CB Series triumph in Australia. I was part of the Indian squad for the CB Series. It was my comeback from the long layoff caused by the knee injury and surgery.

Subsequently, the IPL auctions happened, and like every other cricketer in the country, I was waiting eagerly to know which team I would be playing for. I was elated to go to the Chennai Super Kings. It meant Mahi Bhai and I would be playing for the same team. I heard from him almost immediately after I was bought in the auction. He said, 'Maza aayega dekh.' There was a lot of attention on him, of course. And looking at some of the other figures whom Chennai had bought—Matthew Hayden, Muttiah Muralitharan and Stephen Fleming—I was just delighted to be in the same team as them. The IPL strengthened my bond with Mahi Bhai even further.

Initially, we spent a lot of time with each other in and around the hotel in Chennai. Then, once we became familiar with everything

that the city had to offer, we started exploring Chennai in our own ways. I had my yellow sports car, and he had his bikes. Hayden used to go surfing. We became one big family. In Chennai, Mahi Bhai and I are actually referred to as '*Thala*' (Tamil for 'Chief') and '*Chinna Thala*' ('Deputy Chief'), and it means a lot to me.

Through it all, Mahi Bhai has always been there for me. He has also been around for all the major moments of my career, right from the start.

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It was the last day of the camp in Bangalore in 2005 when I got a congratulatory message directly from chief selector Kiran More Sir, saying that I had been picked in the Indian squad for the tour to Sri Lanka. That was back when I didn't have my own phone. It's such a special feeling when the selector himself gets in touch with you.

Since the BCCI soon made the announcement—an hour before time—the TV channels started covering it as well. I went to a phone booth and made a call back home to let them know that I had been selected and that I was coming home the next day. When I reached home, everyone was very happy. I had my first encounter with the media that day. A couple of TV journalists were already present there. They interviewed me and my parents, and I felt so special.

I was all of eighteen then. That was the biggest moment of my life and the most important day of my life. I had seen Gyanendra Pandey play for India and then seen Kaif Bhai. I had shared the dressing room with them in the Ranji Trophy. And now, the India call-up felt all too surreal.

I'd had a good season in 2005.1 had scored 600-odd runs in the 2004-05 Ranji season and scored an 89 not out in a crucial game.

Gopal Sharma was the national selector from the Central Zone during that period. He had been the first player from UP to play for the country post-independence. He had been a coach before becoming a selector, and his batch had so many talented players. Kaif Bhai, then me, R.P. Singh, Piyush Chawla a bit later, Praveen Kumar. Teams around the country were intimidated by us. We were quite a formidable unit.

I got the call-up to the camp while I was in England playing league cricket. It was part of Rahul Bhai's plan to have a big bench as part of our 2007 World Cup preparation. He wanted more youngsters in the set-up after he took over as captain. It was a tough team to break into, especially as a middleorder batsman. There were so many guys, either within the team or just on the cusp of making it through. You had Yuvi Pa and Kaif Bhai already in there. Then I was competing with the likes of Ambati Rayudu, Venn Bhai, Parthiv and Niraj Patel.

Early on in the camp, the main focus was on fitness and fielding. There were so many talented players and fielders in particular. Ajit Agarkar had been around for quite a while at that point, but he was still brilliant. We were divided into different groups for batting, bowling and fielding. Accordingly, we were trained in the camp. I was fortunate to be around *Paaji* (Sachin Tendulkar) and Rahul Bhai. Rahul Bhai was very impressed with the way I did my fielding drills and even asked me where I learnt to dive and slide so well.

Viru Pa (Virender Sehwag) was going nuts with the bat in that camp. I remember how he was hitting Murali Kartik for six after six after six. I was batting at the other end, in awe of how easy he made batting look. I was a boy in a man's world all of a sudden. I remember Harbhajan bowling during that camp, and I hit a six—the ball smashed against one of the screens at the stadium. He said,

‘Let’s see how you face Muralitharan in Sri Lanka.’ I wasn’t sure how to react then. But later, I walked up to him and apologized, and then we made up. He even appreciated my game.

I also realized that there was a stark contrast between the players from the north and those from the south. Those from the south were very disciplined, while those from the north were extremely expressive during the game. And I was from the north, but I could blend with both groups. I think that is what all of them liked about me in the team. I used to spend quite a lot of time with Gauti Bhai (Gautam Gambhir) back then as well. He was extremely stubborn about wanting to win. I used to watch him and wanted to be more like him. The big turning point for me, I think, was while I was batting with Sachin, during a practice game at the camp. I made 95. That call from Kiran Sir came soon after.

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We assembled in Chennai before leaving for Sri Lanka. It was a tri-series, involving the hosts and the West Indies. We had to click a team photograph for the media that day. There were these bell-bottoms that we had to wear, along with the team blazer with ‘BCCT and ‘Sri Lanka Tour’ written on it. I remember not being able to wear a tie and taking help from someone at the hotel. We landed in Colombo and went straight to Dambulla.

I remember our first visit to the ground. I had Viru Pa sitting on my left, Laxman was in front, and on my right I had Sachin who was praying to Sai Baba. And I felt so awkward initially since I was a youngster among these experienced players. I was desperately looking for Dhoni and Irfan.

However, one thing I can’t deny is that the seniors really took care

of the juniors. Zaheer was like a big brother. We were all like a big family. And Rahul really knew how to manage people well. There was this feeling of brotherhood among us that kept us together.

I was informed quite early on that I'd be playing the opening game of the tournament against Sri Lanka. Rahul Bhai was the one who let me know. Having my hero tell me that I was going to play my first match for India was extra special. It was also a good feeling to know that Venu Bhai was making his debut alongside me. He had been such a great guide for Shikhar and me while we were in Australia.

We batted first, which meant I had some extra time to let my nerves settle. It was a good Sri Lankan attack, with Dilhara Fernando, Farveez Maharoof and the great Murali. Unfortunately, we lost a few wickets early. And before I knew it, I was putting my gloves on. I walked past Kaif Bhai, who had been dismissed, but didn't look at him. Thankfully, Rahul Bhai was out there in the middle to greet me.

The score was a tricky 63/4. And whom did I have to face first? The greatest off-spinner of all time, Muttiah Muralitharan. I remember when I was going out to bat, Viru had advised me not to play the cut shot early on against Murali. Play on the front foot instead, he'd said. There were a couple of others who had given me various tips and tricks regarding how I should go about it. Then the moment came. And what do I do on the first ball? I try to play a cut shot. Before I knew the ball had smashed into my pads. Just like that, it was all over for me. I had been given out LBW. I just knew I was out the moment I missed the ball.

I was anyway playing without having had any sleep. I had told my family and friends about the match—it was my international debut after all. So, after the dismissal, I was extremely sad in the dressing

after all. So, after the dismissal, I was extremely sad in the dressing room. The first man to greet me was Mahi Bhai. He put an arm around me and said it was okay. He said what's done is done. The match was still not over. Irfan, too, sat next to me and tried to console me.

Then Rahul Bhai came in after making a half century and spoke to me. He said even if I kept scoring zeroes for the next few matches, it wouldn't mean the end of the world: 'We have picked you at eighteen because we see a big future in you. You were not selected to play one innings.' He said the match itself was not over yet: 'The beauty of cricket is, you can always contribute, especially someone like you, who can bowl too. And if you don't score runs with the bat, then make sure you stop runs on the field. From what I've seen, you're one of the best fielders.'

I didn't bowl till the very end of the match. But I did have my moment on the field to make it a memorable debut when I ran Marvan Atapattu out with a very sharp piece of fielding off Zaheer Bhai's bowling. I picked up the ball on the move at square leg, had one stump to aim at and hit it. Even Marvan was shocked and kept looking back. I had produced a wicket out of nothing at a crucial stage for my team. I felt so good. Rahul Bhai was right, not surprisingly.

We lost the game, but I learnt a lesson in my debut itself. That success and failure are indeed part of playing sports, and that your fortunes, especially in cricket, can change within the space of a couple of hours on the field.

Next morning at breakfast, Rahul Bhai brought Marvan along and introduced me to him. Marvan said he'd heard a lot about me and also seen some of my knocks here and there. He said he was excited to see me bat and wished me all the best. As he turned around to

leave, he just smiled and said, 'Yeah, but please don't run me out like that again.' The three of us started laughing. Listening to someone as senior as Marvan say nice things about me made me feel even more like I belonged in that team and at that level.

Rahul Bhai then promoted me from No. 6 to No. 3 for my second game, this time against the West Indies. I wasn't sure whether it was purely a strategic move or a way of motivating me. But I was very happy. It was a position that I enjoyed batting in. I also took it as a good omen. No. 3, after all, has been some sort of a lucky charm for me throughout. The house I grew up in was No. 3. Our house in Delhi currently is No. 3.1 eventually got hold of the No. 3 jersey. All my cars have had '3' on their number plates. I did wear No. 30 at one point for India, which proved to be a lucky charm for Sourav Ganguly too once. It was in his comeback match, his first ODI in nearly eighteen months, against the West Indies in Nagpur, in January 2007. He ended up wearing my shirt and scored 98. He asked me to hand my T-shirt over to him and declared in jest that I wouldn't leave his side till he was in the team since good things were happening to him.

Back to my first knock at No. 3 for India. We were chasing a modest target of 179, and I ended up scoring 35. Rahul Bhai always encouraged me to bowl. He counted on my off-spin to get a crucial wicket even more than I did at times. He would always come to me at practice sessions and would make sure I bowled quite a bit after my batting stint was done. Even in that game, I dismissed their most experienced batsman, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, just when he was trying to build a partnership. It broke the back of their innings and set the game up for us.

That's how it all began for me. I was part of the team for a few GDIs post that, but mainly as a 'super sub'. I would come in mostly for

Murali Kartik once he was done bowling his spell.

I didn't get to bat very often. I kept trying, though. I was basically brought on as a specialist fielder on many occasions when Sri Lanka toured India later in 2005.

But next year, on a high-profile tour of Pakistan, I ended up scoring 3 5 not out in Multan as part of a small run chase but one which sealed the ODI series for us. That was when I started trying to cement my spot in the side, having made the most of the tiny windows that would come my way intermittently.

That knock convinced both Rahul Bhai and Greg Chappell that I was the right fit for the middle order with Mahi Bhai and Yuvi Pa. Their plans of chasing down totals would work with the three of us firing in the middle and lower-middle order.

Mahi Bhai was with me when I won my first Man of the Match award in Faridabad. Then, in Pune, we built a partnership of 80-odd runs against Sri Lanka. He scored 50 and I made 39 not out. Against (Dil-hara) Fernando, Lasith Malinga, Vaasy (Chaminda Vaas), Muralitharan. Our leftyrighty combination also worked. If we weren't already with each other a lot off the field, we ended up spending a lot of time batting together in the middle.

Those first few years that I had travelled with the team taught me a lot. Rahul Bhai would often take me out for dinner and ask me what I had learnt. Even Sachin Paaji and I would often have such conversations. He would come and stand beside me when I would be practising fielding. I would feel the need to impress him since I was a junior. It was a great experience.

I was the second-youngest captain India had ever had in GDIs. This was less than five years after my debut. I was still only twenty-

three years old when we left with a very young side in 2010 for Zimbabwe for a tri-series, which included Sri Lanka.

I was no stranger to captaining a cricket team. I had led sides during my time at the sports hostel. I had by then already led UP, India A and a team in the Challenger Trophy. That year, I had also captained the Chennai Super Kings for a couple of games when Mahi Bhai had injured himself. We won both those games, which were very important for us qualifying for the playoffs before we went on to lift the trophy. I had also been the vice-captain of the India under-19 team at the World Cup when Rayudu was captain. I don't think I was a born leader, but I believe I always have been someone who can take on responsibility.

I always tried to be the kind of cricketer Rahul Bhai was. He was my idol. When it came to captaincy, though, I think I tried to bring in a mix of Rahul Bhai and Mahi Bhai. Not only in the way they handled the media but also how they were with the players in their team. It was always about bringing the best out of your players and doing what was best for the team. As a captain, you end up being even more of a team man.

It was such a proud moment for me when the selectors informed me that I was being named captain for the Zimbabwe tour. It was a team full of my peers and some younger players. There are so many unforgettable memories from that tour. Wearing the Indian blazer and walking out for the toss; going to the embassy dinner and giving a speech. The first question I was asked by the media when I did a pre-tour press conference in India was, how someone so young can be named India captain. I just smiled and said even I didn't expect captaincy to come that early in my career.

Leading the Indian team out in Harare and seeing lots of Indian

flags around the ground was another incredible moment for me. We didn't have a great tournament and were knocked out quite early on, winning only a single game. Zimbabwe beat us in both our league games. I also learnt some hard truths about captaincy on that tour: that if you win, the entire team gets the credit, but if you lose, it's the captain who mainly gets the brickbats. That's just part of being captain.

Despite the results, I was happy with the gains the younger players in the side, which included me by the way, had made on that tour. Ravichandran Ashwin made his debut, Rohit Sharma got his first two ODI tons, Virat Kohli was batting really well, and Ravindra Jadeja was great with bat and ball. That's something I learnt from Mahi Bhai over the years: as a captain, you cannot be fixated on results. If your players are progressing and improving their games, that at times is as important as winning.

My next assignment as captain was far more successful. It happened in 2011 on a tour to the Caribbean. We were playing a T20I and an ODI series right after we had won the World Cup and CSK had won the IPL for the second time. On that occasion, I had some senior players playing under me as well, like Harbhajan Singh. He was very supportive of me and played a huge role in our winning the series. He was also extremely understanding when I told him that we wanted to try Ashwin out for the last two GDIs once we'd already won the series. It was so pleasing to see such a senior player stand by his young captain. I will always be thankful to Bhajji Pa for being the guiding light for me on that tour. I also understood the power of communication in making one a successful captain. It's a trait that Mahi Bhai has mastered over the years. He'll make sure a player who is not in the playing eleven knows exactly why that's the case. It really builds trust inside the dressing room and improves everyone's relationship with each

other.

On the field, there are some bowlers, like Ashwin, who don't need any direction. He has always known what he wants to do with each ball, and you just let him stick with it and try and see what you can do to help him, like Mahi Bhai did for so many years. With someone like Munaf Patel, though, it's different. He would at times want me to walk up and suggest a few ideas as to where to bowl to a particular batsman or what plans we could have in place for him.

Apart from learning about responsibility, I think I became a calmer person once I started captaining a lot more. The two years I led Gujarat Lions in the IPL were the biggest learning curve. Captaining in the IPL is very different. At CSK, the team management is so seasoned at dealing with cricketers that they never get too involved and never interfere. But at Gujarat, they had a young owner and they had two years to make a big impression. Understandably, they were desperate to win. It was a different challenge for me. I would at times get in touch with Mahi Bhai, who was with Rising Pune Supergiant, and talk to him about some of my decisions or just ask him for some feedback. I would also at times contact Viru Pa to get some suggestions.

As a captain, there are some calls you make on the field that are based completely on your instinct. Those gut decisions can go both ways. But it's so important to go with them. It's something you can do in life too. Try thinking with your heart and going with your gut. Being logical is great, but at times listening to your inner voice isn't a bad thing.

I remember backing left-arm wrist spinner Shivil Kaushik for Gujarat in the IPL. He was an unknown quantity. He had a quirky action, and I had a feeling that he might succeed. A lot of intelligent

voices within the team felt like he wasn't ready. But facing him in the nets convinced me that he would trouble batsmen who hadn't faced him before. He ended up getting 3/20 in only his second game for us against the Kings XI Punjab. And these were wickets of Murali Vijay, Shaun Marsh and Glenn Maxwell!

That's another aspect of captaincy I learnt from Mahi Bhai. You should always listen to senior players in the side and to those with more experience than you, and even, for that matter, to a youngster who has an idea. Like I used to do at Gujarat with the likes of Dwayne Bravo, Brendon McCullum and Dale Steyn. But at the end of the day, when you're on the field, it is always your call as captain. The onus is on you, and you have to own up to it if a decision doesn't go your way.

I am someone who wants to be surrounded by positivity. There's no space for negativity in my life. And that's something I try to instil in every youngster who plays under me.

Young people often don't know how to handle failure. Some aren't used to it coming up the ranks. In India, to get to even state level, you must never have a lean run as a batsman or bowler at the junior levels. Otherwise, it's very difficult to break through the competition and stand out. So it often happens that young players experience failure for the first time at the senior-most level of the game. They're at times taken aback by it. They can't fathom how it could happen to them. Like me on my debut, for example.

They need to learn that getting out for a cheap score is as important as scoring hundreds at times. That's what cricket has taught me. And that's what I want to tell every young person reading this. Failure is not only the stepping stone to success as you've all heard; it's also a pathway to a better understanding of life.

That's one of the main reasons I've never left Uttar Pradesh. Many others who I started playing alongside me have gone and played for other states. Most of them leave citing politics and other issues with the administration. I've got offers too. I am aware of all the issues. But my heart is with UP, where it will be till the end of my career. How can I ever abandon the state that has given me so much in cricket and in life? Imagine Suresh Raina playing for Jammu and Kashmir or for Tamil Nadu in the Ranji Trophy. It doesn't even sound right.

I think it's my job to guide youngsters. That's what I am meant to do. I owe it to UP. Apna-apna karna kaafi aasan hai but is that enough? Giving back to the game that's given us so much is the duty of each one of us. You can never forget your roots. I think that's why I always think that guiding UP to a Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy win in 2015-16 was my happiest memory as captain. I remember hitting Irfan for a six in the last over, but our team's success was built around a lot of young boys making a name for themselves.

I often speak to young cricketers about some realities in life. You need to get your priorities right. I always tell them, if you stay focused on your cricket and stay disciplined, you would go a long way, you would have a lot of money come your way. Always invest the money well and think of your wife and kids and parents when you do that. Secure their future first before you start indulging in whatever you want to do with it. Family should always come first.

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Mahi Bhai always makes fun of me for being clumsy. I've seen him talk about how if I am around in his room, I would end up dropping something or walking into something. 'Tu rahega toh kuch na kuch

hoga,' he likes to say. Maybe there's some truth there. I am just a very energetic person, and I am always up and about as you might have seen me on the field.

There's another thing that he is amused by. He'll talk about how I would saunter into his room, order a lot of food over room service and not even wait for it to arrive. I'll tell you why I am always keen on ordering my own food. What happens with a lot of them is that they would order nothing but chicken and roti. I, on the other hand, am a vegetarian. Moreover, I never have maida, because back home, I was used to having rotis made of ragi atta. My eating habits are pretty desi, so I need a good number of vegetable dishes and can't do without a dal.

So, Mahi would ask me to order my own food. But often, after ordering, I would remember that I had a gym session and end up not eating that food. But I made it a point to not waste it and would go back later for it, even if by then the food had gone cold.

Talking of room service always reminds me of the times Robin Uthappa and I would order food on Mahi Bhai's tab. And of that time in Pakistan when Rahul Bhai was captain and said, 'Boys, order whatever you want. It's on me.' We made him pay for that reckless statement.

It involved, me, Irfan, Robin and Mahi Bhai. It was Dhoni's idea. He just called up room service and asked for a double of everything we had ordered. Two milkshakes, an extra biryani, two extra rotis, two more dais, two more sabzis. Rahul Bhai couldn't stop laughing at us. He eventually admitted that he'd learnt his lesson and that he would never give us a free hand again with room service. We did end up finishing everything we'd ordered, though.

That's the kind of fun Mahi Bhai and I would have at other people's

expense all the time. We are like partners in crime when it comes to pulling someone else's leg. I've been at the receiving end too at times, when he decides to turn on me. We've had an interesting relationship over the years.

I have also gone through so much because of our friendship. Like the whole bias angle. People would say, 'Oh, Raina gets picked because he is Dhoni's friend.' But people forget the contributions I have made for teams captained by him—India as well as CSK. That's how you build trust in a player as captain.

For us, it was like how when you have a neighbour over at your place all the time. You can take liberties with that person, saying yeh tohghar ki baat hai. I played so much of my career down the order, and he would say let some of the others play at the top. At times I would say, 'Humein bhi upar khelna hai.' But he would respond, 'Nahi, tu at will chhakke marta hai…' and say that the others, be it Rohit or Virat or Ajju (Ajinkya Rahane), were better off at the top of the order. I was more reliable in those situations. He knew my mindset. He knew what brought the best out of me. And I trusted him. It would hurt when people kept linking our friendship to my being part of the team. I don't think the numbers lie. I've always earned my spot in the team, just like I earned Mahi Bhai's trust and respect. I was there for him. He always made me feel special. Nobody can take away from that. And it doesn't matter what people say…

We grew closer and closer, and even got to know a lot about each other's personal lives and families. I went to his house and met his family. After meeting them, I realized why he is so sorted. Sakshi and he came to meet my parents soon after their wedding. A UP-Bihar cultural connection there as well.

There's always a lot of talk about Mahi Bhai being Captain Cool. But I can tell you that is not his greatest strength as captain. He will never compromise on the game. That's what I like about him the most. That's what I think makes him such a legendary captain and a fantastic leader.

You could not take any game lightly and nobody could have fun at the expense of the game. He was emotional about playing for the country. 'You are playing for your country. There can be no excuses,' he would tell us.

Masti only after the match was done. That was a standout feature about him. From the moment the national anthem was sung, you were representing the tricolour. This was serious business. There was no room for relaxing, even if he might look like the most relaxed cricketer in the world. For him, it didn't matter which player was winning the game for the country, till the time India won. That was why he kept out of the limelight after we won, even after the World Cup.

I don't think he ever changed as a cricketer. His attitude towards cricket has never changed. His priorities have always stayed the same. He has stayed a simple person, and that's why God has been so kind to him.

If you ask me about the most important lessons I've learnt from Mahi Bhai, I'd say his simplicity and his humanity. It's about respecting your surroundings, your passions, your dreams and your commitments towards what you want to achieve in life. How to be responsible and how to be in a moment where you're not thinking about tomorrow or even the next moment. You're just staying and focusing on that moment. You breathe every moment of your life in. And then breathe it out.

He just loves cricket and the little things around it. He would always insist that he put the grips on my bats. That's a trait with all great cricketers: what makes them special is not simply scoring big runs or winning matches, but the little joys they derive from being on a cricket field or in a dressing room. That's what helps you stay humble, with your feet firmly on the ground, even as the rest of the country considers you to be a superhero with wings.

7

Rahul Bhai

Rahul Dravid would always encourage all the younger players in the team to speak up in the dressing room. That was his way of making sure we felt comfortable and like we belonged. He always wanted us to feel that we too had our voice within the team and that we could speak up whenever we wanted to without any apprehension. In fact, he encouraged us to speak our minds. It created a wonderfully refreshing atmosphere within the camp, where there was no clear hierarchy. That was his endeavour. Personal engagement with players really mattered to him.

Once, though, he went a little too far with it. Or so I felt back then. It was around 2006, when Rahul Bhai was captain. We were in Gwalior for some game. There was this seminar on HIV, and Jyotiraditya Scindia had asked Rahul Bhai to share his

thoughts with the audience on the subject. Rahul Bhai insisted that I come with him and share my views on it too. Back then, I was a really shy person, and I had no idea what to say. He, however, encouraged me to engage with the youth of the country by sharing my experiences and inspiring them. That was quite a moment for me as he made me realize that I was representing a number of people—my team, my family and even the youth, and that it was important to let people know your views on certain subjects.

As a matter of fact, I didn't know much about HIV, barring the general facts that are known to most of us. I just went on to speak in Hindi, reiterating the same points I had heard Rahul Bhai talk

about, regarding maintaining safety and using condoms. I mean, hilariously, I still hadn't had my own experiences with all this. Getting off the stage, I was very nervous and shy about what I had said up there. But the audience seemed to have appreciated my effort. Even Rahul Bhai came up and praised my speech, and I remember looking flushed and complaining about the difficult spot he had put me in.

I told him that I was fine with doing anything related to the game, that he could make me run as many laps as he wanted to, but these social events weren't my cup of tea. I said, 'Next time se maafkar dena, Rahul Bhai. Main jitna aap bolo, running ya catching kar loonga.' And he just laughed.

However, he went on say that since I was a part of the team, my views did hold quite a lot of significance to him as well as to the rest of the country. He always believed in the holistic development of players. That was one of his major guiding philosophies as a captain: that you can't just focus on what you do on the field. The growth needs to happen both on and off the field. You have to become a fully rounded individual. That is what helps you become a better cricketer. I am not surprised that he follows the same principle even now, as a coach of the junior teams and also as the head of the National Cricket Academy (NCA). You just have to look at all the performers that India has had across all formats in recent years. They've all come from the Rahul Dravid school of playing and understanding cricket. No wonder they all seem so sorted.

My first meeting with Rahul Bhai happened in Bangalore in 2002.1 was there as part of an under-19 camp. We were about to leave for England to play some junior Tests there. It was around the same time the Indian team was leaving for a tour of England. And I remember he was there with the likes of Sanjay Bangar and Wasim

Jaffer practising at the NCA. That was the first time I actually saw him in person. But we didn't have much of a conversation. I was just so excited seeing him and watching him go about his routine in the nets. I used to be such a massive fan of his back then, like all of us from that generation. We all wanted to be like him and develop that determination and dedication towards the game. While I was playing a Ranji Trophy match as a youngster, I remember how I would sneak into the NCA to catch glimpses of Rahul Bhai sweating it out on the field or in the nets for hours on end.

My earliest memories of Rahul Bhai are from the late '90s and early 2000s. I remember him taking on Allan Donald in one game. And then there was the match where he, Sachin Paaji and *Dada* (Sourav Ganguly) all scored hundreds. This was in the Leeds Test on that 2002 tour. Such amazing batting! Then there was the game against Pakistan where Wasim Akram took two quick wickets, and it was Rahul Bhai who steadied the ship. That was high-quality batting from him against a fearsome attack.

Then came the tour of Australia in 2003: his double hundred in Adelaide and the shot he played to win India that famous Test match. I was watching it on TV, and I idolized him. Not surprisingly, every time I stepped on to the field back then, I tried to bring his intensity and discipline to every game I played.

Our first proper meeting also happened incidentally at the NCA. It was when I was attending a camp under the then head coach of the senior India team, Greg Chappell. Rahul Bhai was the captain of the Indian team back then. We all had great respect for him and would often engage in conversations with him, where he would inquire about how the boys from UP were performing. He would take out time to share his observations regarding our fielding and other such areas of the game. Yuvraj and I often bonded with him over

such conversations. The man was a great student of the game. However, his interest wasn't only be restricted to that. He was curious to know what was going on around him in various states, what our administration was doing for us and how junior cricket was coming along. He was always asking us questions rather than the other way around. Even V.V.S. Laxman was of a similar nature, but I somehow ended up bonding with Rahul Bhai more.

The next time I met him, and when we really began bonding, was when I went to Sri Lanka on my first official tour with the senior India team. This was in 2005, when I made my ODI debut. He had a couple of friends there, whom he introduced us to. There was this Bombay family that we got acquainted to. We would go to their place for meals. Rahul Bhai would always make sure he engaged with the team outside the grounds too. He was really good with his management skills and would do his utmost to inspire us and keep us motivated. We were juniors at that time, and it really felt good to bond with someone of his stature, his experience and his standing. There were lessons learnt during those outings that stick with me to this day.

In 2006, we went to Jamaica for a Test series against the West Indies, and I was a part of the squad. Rahul Bhai's wife, Vijeta Bhabhi, and son, Samit, had accompanied him on this tour, and I remember interacting with the two and playing with Samit on multiple occasions. She would always ensure that Rahul Bhai slept on time and took enough rest as he was the opening batsman for that innings. The rest of us who were not playing, including Ramesh Powar and myself, would all be training as early as five in the morning with Greg Chappell. I remember telling them that I didn't want to train on the field but on the beach. So, we spent quite a lot of time for the next two months running for hours every day near the sea. And Rahul Bhai was such a supportive captain at that

near the sea. And Rahul Bhai was such a supportive captain at that time. He would often come to the beach and watch us train. He would motivate us, asking us not to feel disappointed for not being part of the playing XI just yet and tell us that we would soon be playing. I mean, he wasn't really obliged to do that, even as the captain of the team. But that's the difference with him. He was more than just a good captain or a talented player. He was a gem of a person.

Back in Jamaica, Ramesh and I would entertain Samit. We weren't really babysitting, as Vijeta Bhabhi was always with him. They would sit outside the hotel, near the trees, and sometimes Samit liked running around. That was when we would join him and play with him. We all had fun together.

I subsequently met Samit in Bangalore on multiple occasions, in recent past as well. He also attended a few matches during the 2011 World Cup and the IPL. I am so glad that he is playing cricket himself now.

The impact that Rahul Bhai had not only on me but on all the players was immense. And this wasn't restricted just to our initial days but continued later as well. From time to time, he would join us in our training sessions at various stadiums; he would run with us, practise batting and fielding. It was very inspiring for us. And watching him was a great learning experience. After all, it does help to have the captain of the team practise with you, encourage you and bond with you through the process. Those were good times.

Rahul Bhai always had this curiosity about things. He always wanted to know what was going on in your life or in your family back home. It was the same when it came to exploring countries and cities while we were on tour. He enjoyed going out during a tour whenever he wasn't playing or practising. He has always been

inquisitive and eager to learn more about subjects beyond cricket.

The 2006 tour of Pakistan was an eye-opener in that sense. He took me for the inauguration of Inzamam-ul-Haq's hospital in Multan during that trip. Basically, whenever we were free, Rahul Bhai would drop a text to some of us in the team, asking us to accompany him on these short expeditions exploring the city we were stationed in. He viewed socializing to be a very important part of our training and would encourage us to engage with more people —to talk to them, inspire them and learn from them in return as well. During that time, India-Pakistan relations were fine, and we had fun there.

As far as I can remember, we met a few patients at Inzi Bhai's hospital. We were under a heavy security cover. Otherwise, it was a good experience though. They gave us a quick tour of the place, showing us the equipment in use and other such facets of the hospital. Pakistan was almost like India itself—their food, language and the like. We enjoyed our experience there. There is a lot of history associated with that place after all. I played a couple of under-19 tournaments there as well. Yuvraj and I would often be found shopping in Karachi for gifts for our mothers.

We also visited the Khyber Pass area with the team. On this tour, we met the then president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, after an ODI in Lahore. Rahul Bhai introduced everyone, including the players and the BCCI members, to the president. He came to meet and congratulate all the players. We actually won that game. That was when he asked Mahi Bhai not to cut his hair. We have pictures from back then. It feels good to look back at those memories, recalling all that we had achieved and done.

Rahul Bhai was always like family. He would keep fighting for the

rights of the junior players. Those extra efforts always matter and leave an impact on people. Youngsters were very important to him. Look at the kind of players who matured under him—the ones that went on to lead India over the next decade. These included M.S. Dhoni, Irfan Pathan, Yuvraj, Piyush Chawla, Dinesh Karthik, Munaf Patel, S. Sreesanth and myself. Rahul Bhai knew that these seven or eight boys would be the face of the team in the coming years. And he made sure that we were nurtured well.

That kind of psychological boost, I have always felt, is needed for players to perform well, and I think the BCCI should take steps to ensure that. Especially for young players who have to stay away from their families and homes for lengthy periods of time. They can't say anything to anyone. It is the captain's responsibility to give them that space, like Rahul Bhai did for us.

Generally, when people talk about the Indian cricket team that has emerged over the last 10-15 years, the credit is usually given to Dhoni, or to Ganguly before him, for having built the team and taken Indian cricket forward. I have never quite agreed with that. I never say Dada made this team. He, and Dhoni, did lead and make an impact on it, that's true. But the man responsible for making the teams for all three formats of the game is Rahul Dravid.

Rahul Bhai would often fight with selectors to include young talent in the Indian team. And one advice he would keep giving us was that we should go back to playing Ranji Trophy whenever possible, perform well and score heavily there, and then come and play for the Indian team again. He was an extremely match-oriented coach and player that way. He would himself keep playing multiple matches for his state in the Ranji Trophy. In fact, when we would practise at the NCA, I heard him complain a couple of times; he told us that we should instead be playing Ranji Trophy matches.

It's something that is really missing from Indian cricket these days. We rarely see high-profile players show up for these domestic competitions even when they can. I understand when your schedule is such that you have no time to play for your state. But whenever you can, it should be a priority. That was what all the great players did.

Rahul Bhai was also there for my lowest moments and for some of the most difficult times during my career. One such phase occurred in 2007, when I had been laid low by a serious knee injury. I ended up being bed-ridden for six months. I had been injured during a domestic one-day match in Indore. It was so bad that I needed to undergo an ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) surgery. I was only twenty. I had never imagined I would have a surgery at that early a stage of my career. It was one of the most challenging periods for me, both emotionally and physically. I would often limp across to the nets near my house to see some kids practising. That was the only link I had to cricket. I didn't know if I would ever be the same player again. These are the kinds of doubts that go through a cricketer's mind when they have a serious injury. Those are the times when you doubt yourself the most.

Going through a lean patch with the bat is different from this. At least in that case you know you are in control of your own destiny. You can spend hours in the nets working on your skills. But when you've been ruled out for 6-7 months due to a serious injury, a certain sense of helplessness sets in.

It didn't help that many had signed me off back then. So that comeback in itself was quite a task—to get back in shape, start playing Ranji Trophy again, win back the selectors' faith and play with the same seniors again.

And that time, Rahul Bhai was a great support to me. So was Ratnakar Shetty Sir, the veteran BCCI administrator, whom I am really grateful to for having helped me cover the costs of the surgery. I had no money back then. The surgery had amounted to around Rs 4 lakh, which was really big money for me. Moreover, there was the house loan that I was trying to pay off. So it was a tough time for me.

Rahul Bhai was the one who would regularly message me and check on my wellbeing. This was when he was India captain and had thousands of other responsibilities and pressures to deal with. But he always kept an eye out for me. It is a special feeling to know that the man at the helm has that level of trust in you. At one point, Rahul Bhai also said that he would have loved having me at the 2007 World Cup if I had been fit. He told me that my energy and enthusiasm would have been a great boost to the team in what was a difficult tournament for them.

Later that year, I was in England doing some rehab work. The Indian team was there too, on a Test tour. I wanted to meet Rahul Bhai and decided to go to the team hotel in London. I didn't have his local number, though (this was long before the era of WhatsApp). So I went there, and the hotel staff asked me to get in touch with Chandu Borde, the great former cricketer who was the team manager for that tour.

Unfortunately, Borde Sir didn't recognize me and couldn't quite make out how I had just randomly shown up at the hotel hoping to meet the captain of the Indian team. I told him I was Suresh Raina, but it didn't seem to have made any impression on him. So, I just hung around in the lobby hoping that Rahul Bhai would come down at some point. Eventually, some two hours later, I spotted him exiting a lift and managed to grab his attention. We then ended up

stepping out for a coffee. I informed him I was feeling much better. The massive smile on his face told me just how happy he was to hear that. He was bemused and amused at the same time when I described my inability to make a breakthrough with Borde Sir. We still laugh about it to this day.

Rahul Bhai as captain could be a very intense man. I honestly haven't feared anyone more than him on and off the cricket field. We would see him at breakfast on the morning of the match: he would be sitting with a very serious expression on his face. At times, I wondered if I should just ask him to relax a little and smile. But I knew that this was his way of preparing for a game. He was in that zone where no nobody could bother him.

He was also particular about how we carried ourselves as cricketers. Rahul Bhai looked at playing for India as an honour. And he always believed that, as representatives of our country, we should be mindful of what we wear and how we present ourselves. There was this one occasion where I was guilty of crossing that line, unintentionally.

We were in Malaysia for a tri-series involving the West Indies and Australia. I walked into some shop in a mall and bought a new T-shirt. I was very happy with my purchase and walked out wearing it before bumping into Rahul Bhai. The T-shirt was a branded one: it had 'FCUK' written in bold letters right across the middle. I really had no idea what it meant or what it could be perceived as. I just liked how it looked on me.

Rahul Bhai gave me a proper dressing down right there in the mall. 'Do you know what you are wearing and walking around in? You are an Indian cricketer. You cannot be out in public with that written on your T-shirt/ he said. I had no answer. I tried explaining to him that I didn't know it had a bad connotation. I was so taken

to him that I didn't know it had a bad connotation. I was so taken aback and scared that I immediately went to the restroom, changed into something else and threw that T-shirt in the bin.

Rahul Bhai did loosen up a lot after he moved on from captaincy. Those last few years, he was almost a different man at times. He wanted to joke around all the time. I remember us sharing a lot of laughs in the slips when I started playing Test cricket. Mahi Bhai, Rahul Bhai, Lacchu Bhai (V.V.S. Laxman) and me. Always lots of laughter in the slip cordon.

He would smile a lot more and also wanted to spend time with younger members of the team; he would try and participate in whatever they were up to. One night in the Caribbean in 2011, he was more relaxed than I ever saw him before. In fact, he was having a blast and letting his hair down.

We had thrown a surprise birthday party to Mahi Bhai in Dominica. It was at the end of a long tour, on which we had won all three series. I remember being shocked when Rahul Bhai showed up in these tight jeans, sipping on a drink or two, and even dancing around. It was a side of him I had never seen before.

I walked up to him and said, 'Rahul Bhai, aap theek ho na? Aapko kya ho gay a?' And he just shot back at me saying, 'Arre, Suresh, come on yaar, have some fun. Let's enjoy this night.'

It's a level of trust and closeness that I have not shared with too many people during my life and career. So, of course, Rahul Bhai was one of the first people I informed when I decided to retire from international cricket in 2020.

8

My Partnership with Priyanka

It eventually took me a few retakes in my head to finally garner the courage to go through with it. I have faced some of the fastest bowlers in the world. I have played in some of the biggest matches in cricketing history. I have played in a World Cup final at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. But I have never been as nervous as I was on that day. And I am not surprised. I was about to propose marriage to the most special woman I have ever met in life.

I had thought it all out from well before we ended up face to face in the same room in London. It was a long flight from Australia to England. This was early 2015, and I had been down under since late November of the previous year on what was one of the longest tours of my time for Team India. We had already finished a four-Test series against the home team. This had been followed by a tri-nation ODI series, including England, as preparation for the upcoming 50-over ICC World Cup, scheduled to be held in Australia and New Zealand.

We didn't make it to the final of that mini tournament and played our last league game against England at the WACA stadium in Perth on 30 January. We now had an eight-day gap between that and our first warm-up game, which was to be played against Australia at the Adelaide Oval on 8 February. I felt that was enough time for me to go and meet Priyanka. I had set my mind to doing that. I had decided that the time had come.

That was when I told Mahi Bhai and Ravi Shastri, who was the team

director back then, that I would have to fly to London, via Dubai. Priyanka was working in Amsterdam at that point. She was a high-ranking IT professional working for ING Group. I had to talk to the Indian embassy in Australia to see if I could get a Schengen visa, but that would take another week, by when I would have to return.

When I asked her, she told me that she had a UK visa. As did I. And luckily, one of my friends had a house in England. So, I flew for around forty-three hours to meet her.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Indian team management and the captain, who granted me the break to go visit Priyanka. Of course, Mahi Bhai did joke about whether I was sure she was the one. '*Aur bhi ladkiyan mil jaayengi pyaar kame ke liye future mein* (You would get other girls to fall in love with in the future),' he quipped. But I told him how serious I was about Priyanka and how keen I was to initiate marriage discussions with her. After that, he was very supportive. As long as you know what you're doing, go for it,' he said.

At the same time, he also had to make sure, as did Ravi Bhai, that my impromptu visit didn't distract from the team's preparation for the all-important World Cup, in terms of how it might be received by the media if the report leaked out. Mahi Bhai told me that since I was travelling alone and going all the way to London from Perth by myself, that too via Dubai, there were chances of someone taking a picture somewhere which might get leaked to the media. He wanted to make it clear that if that did happen, then it wouldn't be the team's responsibility, which I thought was very understandable. I assured him that this was totally my decision, and that I would be accountable for the repercussions, if any. I then sent an official mail to Ravi Bhai about my trip, stating family commitments as reason for travel. And then I was off on one of the

most important journeys of my life.

I ended up spending a good 5-7 days there, and by the time I returned to Australia, we had decided to get married right after the World Cup. Everyone in the team, led by Mahi Bhai, was super happy for me.

There was a celebratory air in the dressing room, even if our focus immediately shifted to the big tournament coming up.

Priyanka and I had decided to meet in London only a few weeks before I ended up going there. It was during the Test leg of our Australia tour, when we were in Sydney. There was a New Year's Eve party, which I attended along with Virat Kohli, Anushka Sharma (who is now Kohli's wife) and Ishant Sharma. When I returned from it, I spoke to Priyanka for three hours on FaceTime—discussing our school days, our respective families, their rituals and festivals. We had been FaceTiming each other quite a bit during that tour, but this one was the longest. I think it was during that call that I realized I wanted to marry her and that she was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

During that long journey to London, I didn't quite know what to focus on. I kept thinking of various ways I could broach the issue. We had by then been talking regularly, but this was the next step. I remember getting to London and heading straight to my friend's place. Priyanka then came over. It was so great seeing her. Initially, we were part of a group of friends, and we were just having a good time. My friends had thrown us a dinner party. Then it was time for me to have the talk with Priyanka. Once I had mustered the necessary courage, I asked her the question. And yes, I did go down on my knees. It was a yes, and it was one of the happiest moments of my life.

I recall that there had been another occasion earlier, in 2014, while I was on tour in England with the Indian team, when Priyanka and I had planned to meet. But it didn't work out unfortunately. The schedule of matches on that tour was very hectic, and I literally was just travelling from one venue to the next. She had in fact called me and asked if we could meet since she had come to England. However, my match was scheduled to be in Birmingham while she was in London, so I couldn't meet her.

Before her, I had a couple of female friends whom I was, and am still, close to. However, I never made any approach of that kind with them, since I was always aware of the fact that I came from a background where these relationships were taken seriously. So, I would only commit to someone I was serious about. It was easy to connect with Priyanka, since we had similar backgrounds and family values— and we had grown up away from any kind of limelight.

Priyanka and I of course went back a long way. Our families had known each other from long before either of us was born. They had all lived in the same area of Muradnagar in Ghaziabad. Her father, Mr Tejpal Chaudhary, had been the PE teacher at the school we all attended for many years. Tejpal Sir had taught us through the generations, including all my brothers. So yes, you could say that a part of it was destiny.

Back in the day, my brother tutored the local kids, and Priyanka came to our house a few times. She and my brother had a common friend, Neha, whom he married later. Our families knew each other too. Priyanka's brother was in my class in school. We would often visit each other's houses for various festivals, since both our mothers were also good friends of each other.

After those early school years, though, we went our separate ways. I went to the sports hostel. She finished her schooling and eventually went to Holland to work. She had an IT job in Ghaziabad before moving to Bangalore for three years. It was while she was working in Bangalore that she received the offer to move overseas. She went there with her mother initially, who helped her settle there. Soon, Priyanka was heading a branch of ING Bank in Amsterdam.

We hadn't been in touch since our school days, and it was totally by chance that our friendship was rekindled. It wasn't planned at all. It was one of those meant-to-be things, or so I can say now, looking back. It happened at the airport in Mumbai in 2008. She was there for some work, and I was in the city for a Ranji Trophy match.

I'll be honest, though. Initially, I had no clue who she was. We were waiting for our luggage near the baggage carousel, and I thought she looked familiar but couldn't really place her. That's when we interacted for the first time. We hit it off immediately, recalling our time growing up in Ghazi-abad. And it was then that we exchanged our phone numbers for the first time.

Though not very regularly, we did start communicating with each other quite a bit from that point on. Or at least kept in touch, I should say. Then she came over to our place on Diwali that year. When my father retired, the general manager of the ordnance factory gave him an award. Her family attended that ceremony, and since it was Dad's retirement, I too was present. That gave us another opportunity to interact and get to know each other better.

This was before I had cemented my place in the Indian team fully. I was still at the beginning of my cricket career. Thereafter, Priyanka and I would keep in touch for a few years only over the phone. But that too stopped for quite some time when I got busy playing continuous tournaments. She was working too. Our families kept

continuous tournaments. She was working too. Our families kept meeting, and she kept visiting my house.

Priyanka has never been much of a cricket fan. In fact, she barely watched it before we got married. She had no clue that I was a cricketer who played for India (she moved to Holland around the time I became a regular with the Indian team). The last I met her during that phase was in 2008, when I had gone home for Diwali, but still there was no talk of cricket—it was all about enjoying the family festivities.

The next she saw me, funnily enough, was on TV. It was when her friends in Amsterdam insisted on watching the 2011 World Cup final, and she spotted me on the screen. That was literally the first time that she actually realized I was a well-known sportsperson who represented the country at the highest level. That was when she texted me for the first time in a while, congratulating me and saying that she appreciated the team's efforts. That set off another chain of conversations between us that continued right through to the moment I decided to board that plane in Perth in February 2015, with a lot of butterflies in my stomach.

Priyanka had been a massive soccer fan since her school days. She would often go and watch the local leagues around Amsterdam. In the last few years, even I accompanied her to watch Ajax play. It's a role reversal of sorts: she's the one educating me about the players and the strategies while we watch soccer.

She still has some of her closest friends in Amsterdam. They are the ones who have always been by her side and whom she'll want by her side in the best of times as well as during the difficult phases. She also had a wonderful life there and worked incredibly hard to establish herself both professionally and personally in a foreign land. That she decided to leave all that to move to India to be with

me just tells you the kind of person she is. She has been a pillar of strength for me, and for my parents too, ever since she became a part of my life. In addition to being a wonderful and very kind person at heart, Priyanka is also someone who doesn't mind making sacrifices for the happiness of those around her.

It could not have been easy for her to move back to India. The lifestyle is so different in Europe. There's so much more freedom in a place like Amsterdam. She did stay in Amsterdam for a while after we got married, but that was because she wanted to wrap up her professional commitments. I visited her often, and we had such wonderful times travelling around Holland. It's one of those places where we Indian cricketers can enjoy being out and about without being surrounded by people and fans. And it was also important, from a relationship point of view, that we got that time for ourselves, away from all the spotlight and fandom. There was this one time we went to a cafe in a lovely village somewhere and bumped into a Sikh man who recognized me. But he was so respectful, and Priyanka was quite amused by the brief attention I received from him. She maintains her links with Holland, and we do own some property there still. I had my second knee surgery there in 2019.

Lack of privacy has been a major challenge for Priyanka, as for any woman who gets married to an Indian cricketer. You can't go anywhere without being recognized. You are always under scrutiny. Peo-pie always have an eye on you and are judging you. Like us, our partners too don't have the freedom to go wherever they please. You end up having to live in a bubble, and it's not easy. But Priyanka has been amazing at that, since she has a life and ambitions of her own and is very mindful of what it's like to be married to a cricketing celebrity in India. That takes a lot of understanding.

understanding.

It's again a testament to her character that she adjusted without any fuss when we eventually moved back to India as a family. At that point, she had lived away for over a decade. She has always been very respectful towards my parents and has taken great care of them. The expectations of Indian society from married women are very different, and it's not always easy for modern-day Indian women to adjust to those. I have great respect for Priyanka and all the other women in our country who manage to find that perfect balance between maintaining those traditional values while at the same time being ambitious and never taking a step back in terms of achieving their own personal and professional goals.

Then there's the other flip side of being married to a cricketer, especially more so in today's world where many have to deal with online abuse. Priyanka wouldn't be the only partner to be subjected to some really ugly trolling on social media when things haven't gone well for me on the field. We've seen that with Virat and Anushka, and with so many other couples. I can't even begin to express how unfair and horrible it is for someone to spew the kind of hatred that our wives have to contend with at times.

After we got married in 2015, there was a phase when I was in and out of the Indian team. Invariably, Priyanka would get targeted with hate tweets and comments about how she was bringing my cricket down and having a negative impact on my career. It made absolutely no sense, but some people get a twisted joy from being mean to others.

Fortunately, Priyanka too, like me, doesn't have any space for negativity in her life and has found ways to cope with it. Most times, she simply ignores these comments and doesn't even acknowledge them. It can get very overwhelming, though, when

you're at the receiving end of some of the nastiness she has had to deal with. The fact that Priyanka is so busy with her own work also means that she doesn't have any time for this nonsense. I do hope, though, that people acknowledge the negative impact this kind of trolling can have on a cricketer and his family, and stop doing it.

Like I said earlier, Priyanka is a self-made woman and has achieved a lot in her life through her own hard work and dedication. And I knew that she couldn't just get out of that life. She is, in my opinion, a born entrepreneur and is always bursting with business ideas. The core value behind most of her pursuits, though, has to do with serving people and bringing a change into the lives of those who aren't always as fortunate as us.

That was the basis of our setting up the Gracia Raina Foundation (GRF), named after our first-born. It was launched on Gracia's first birthday, and its main purpose is to create more awareness around maternal health as well as the physical and psychological issues faced by mothers and their children.

We also consciously set up the GRF in Delhi, so that we could empower more women and children who wouldn't have any access to such essential services otherwise. That was just the first step, though. We have since spread our horizons even more, and the list of our goals now includes sponsoring education for underprivileged kids.

She doesn't, as a result, get to travel with me too much. But when she does, it's a great boon having her around. She's incredibly organized in how she goes about everything in life, and she makes life so much easier, even in the midst of a hectic tournament or IPL season.

Priyanka also worked diligently for nearly three years to develop

Priyanka also worked diligently for nearly three years to develop her own brand of all-natural babycare products. It's called Maate and was launched in 2020. Part of her vision is to enable more and more mothers to make the best choices they can.

And she still has many ideas that we'll see taking shape over the years to come.

Priyanka has been a great mother to Gracia and Rio, the most supportive wife I could have asked for and a very affectionate daughter-in-law. She is an inspiration to not just women across India but for me as well.

She has also helped me become a well-rounded person. I remember the time before she came into my life, when I would get affected by my performances on the field. There were times when I would be really upset with myself or the situation. And even in the early days when Priyanka was touring with me, I wasn't the most expressive. I would come back to the room and not say anything. She would obviously know that I was upset and that I wasn't dealing too well with whatever I was feeling. She encouraged me to speak out and become more expressive. It really had an enormously positive impact on my game and my career. It made me a better person and as with many aspects of my life, the credit again goes to Priyanka.

9

Gracia and Rio

Priyanka didn't tell me straightaway. She made me wait for it. I vividly remember where I was. On the bus, travelling back to the hotel from a practice session in Bangladesh. We were there for a tournament. We were chatting on the phone, and she kept hinting at it throughout the conversation without giving much away. I couldn't hold it in anymore. I just picked up the phone and called her directly.

That's when she told me that she was expecting. To say I was over the moon would be an understatement. I was extremely excited but also concerned at the same time. Here I was, far away from her; and there she was, all by herself. How I wished I could have transported myself to where she was at that exact moment. All I could do, though, was tell her that it would all be okay, that it would, in fact, be great.

I told her she would have to be very strong through this journey and that she would need both our mothers by her side to support her. This was because I had seen a number of players at that time, playing Ranji Trophy or other tournaments, who would miss out on the entire process as they couldn't go back home due to the games lined up. In my case, I come from a place and family where such occasions are given more importance than anything else, and one has to be there for their partner— unconditionally, mentally and physically. So, I had realized that the game would have to take a back seat temporarily as I could always come back later and resume it all.

it all.

The life of a cricketer is filled with moments of ecstasy and moments of despair. Extreme highs and extreme lows. I had experienced many moments of sheer joy till that point in my life and career. From being selected for UP for the first time to making it to the India Under-19 squad, from being picked for India to winning a World Cup. But the knowledge that you are going to become a parent takes you to an extremely different level.

When Priyanka got pregnant, I wanted to be a part of the entire process. I wanted to be in the labour room with her. There was nothing more important to me in life than that. I wanted to see what my wife was going through and be with her throughout. Ever since our marriage, I had been busy in some tournament or the other, and I could hardly be there for her in person. So I didn't want her to feel that she was doing this alone as well. The circumstances were pretty difficult for her, since she was living independently, working and looking after the family—basically doing all that she had to for herself and the family. This was something I wanted to do for her, not to show off how great a husband I am, but as a gesture, to thank her and be there for her as her partner.

Back in my childhood, I would stay at the hostel alone during weekends. All my other classmates and friends would leave for Lucknow or their respective hometowns on Friday evening and would return on Sunday evening. Now, I won't say that I had a disturbed childhood, but yes, it was definitely a challenging one, which taught me a lot about life. I always felt I missed out quite a bit on experiencing some important moments in life with my family. I wasn't going to let that happen ever again. I wanted to live every single moment of Priyanka's delivery.

The experience was fantastic. I will never forget it. The memories

are still very vivid and always will be. Priyanka was in the labour room for two whole days, but she wasn't having any contractions. The doctor kept assuring us that the first baby always faces a bit of difficulty when it comes to the delivery procedure, since it's all very new for the mother as well.

I kept expressing concerns regarding the health of the mother and the child, hoping that the baby would be delivered in a normal state with no complications. The doctor sent us home after two days, saying that the baby would come when it has to, and that we all needed to calm down as there was nothing unusual in our case. So, I took Priyanka out for dinner that night.

The IPL was on that time, and I was the captain of Gujarat Lions. We had a match against RCB in Bangalore. After dinner, she started feeling uneasy and her contractions began, so I rushed her to the hospital. Our families reached there too. We all stayed up through the night as she was in immense pain. Next morning, I called some of her friends as well. You know it is difficult when you haven't been around much. You don't always know whom to turn to at such times. So, I called the people I knew she was close to.

And then Gracia was born. When she first came out, I cut the cord and took her in my arms. That is when she opened her eyes and grabbed my hand—which was such a wonderful feeling for me as a father. Now, Gracia is growing up and loves chatting a lot. I look at her, and I keep getting that flashback of her grabbing my hand. It's a very special memory, extremely close to my heart. And I feel lucky to have her. Daughters are indeed the best.

My parents were as loving and affectionate as anyone else's parents. But because

of my early initiation into hostel life, mine wasn't always the most normal of childhoods. And those experiences can shape your views on parenting and influence your relationship with your child. Becoming a parent was a great experience.

As a kid, when I was in hostel, I wasn't of course exposed to the digital world. We would get to be with the family only during the special occasions of festivals. Thus, the extent to which we could bond with our families back then was way less than is possible today. We used to get letters from the family members inquiring about our health and well-being. In such cases, I would always make it a point to tell them only what was required.

After all, having their child away from home added to their concerns, and so I didn't want to hassle them with unnecessary details about my daily hostel life. Even the challenging bits of hostel life I would refrain from sharing, to spare them the extra stress on account of me. However, personally I would always maintain a positive attitude. It was my responsibility to make sure that I managed myself well and performed well, since my parents had sent me to the sports college with those expectations.

Now that I am a parent myself, perspectives have changed. I feel a constant need to be there for my kids—totally involved and engaged in their lives. I want to give them all that I missed out on as a child. Not the

material pleasures of life, like money and fame, but other immaterial yet far more significant things of life, like time and love.

Over the last twenty years and more, my priority in life has always been the game. But, with time, you realize the value of personal experiences with your loved ones. I feel the need to be with my family and my kids now. I don't mind missing a match here or there

if my children need me for some reason. I remember, back in college, I used to always be apprehensive about calling my family and asking them to come and watch me play. The very thought of them having to travel for so long would distress me.

People often fail to fathom the fact that even celebrities and sportspersons have normal human lives. They keep associating you with your performances solely. In such cases, I guess your responsibility doubles, where you need to keep performing well while staying committed to family life.

I don't live with my parents. They live in Ghaziabad, while I moved to Delhi after marriage. But during those big moments of life, you need the support of your family.

The initial phase of having a child is challenging. You need to stay up all night and feed the child, till they are at least nine months old. Priyanka underwent a lot of physical and mental changes through this process. And it was all the more difficult since she didn't have her friends around. Both our families were really supportive of her and helped through the phase. Eventually, all three of us got used to things. In fact, Gracia started travelling pretty early on. I think she was four months old when she first got on a plane, and the poor girl cried throughout the journey. There were people who complained about it too, but it wasn't something we could help despite all our efforts. She was with me most of the time on that journey, but nothing I did would stop her. The travelling toughened her up early in life. Even I have travelled a lot in my life, and that has taught me a great deal. These experiences are necessary in life as they teach you stuff beyond what you find in books. It's all about practical experiences.

Parenthood starts changing your perspective towards the sport as

well. It lets you see all your successes and failures in a different light. Suddenly, at the end of a game, you aren't immediately analysing or reviewing your performance. Your first thought is about your child—you are wondering what she would be up to at that point.

When I became a parent, there was a shift in attention for sure, but for me it was about finding the right balance between the journey I was on in my sporting career and the one I was on in life. I had gone through a lot—a surgery; then I was made the captain of the team; I scored 4000 runs; I continued playing IPL; and a lot more. The best part was that both Gracia and Priyanka were there with me during all these moments. They travelled with me. It was a different feeling, but a good one nevertheless. And Gracia would have fun with Ziva (M.S. Dhoni's daughter), Hinaya (Harbhajan Singh's daughter) and the other kids who were accompanying their fathers for the tournament.

As we, the formerly young members of the squad, began to settle down in life off the field, the atmosphere in the dressing room started changing as well. Many of us were now married, and before we knew it there were little kids running around in the team hotels. Our conversations started changing too. Amid all the cricket talk, we also started discussing babies and nappies. But it was different in international cricket. There, we weren't always allowed to bring families along; and even if we did, it wasn't for long periods. However, with the IPL it was different. They knew how the players were all family-oriented and loved to spend time with their children. In fact, the Chennai Super Kings won the 2018 IPL because all of us were in a good frame of mind. Most of our matches were in Pune then, which was a lovely place. The wives and kids would all get together. Sometimes, even we would join them. Chennai had started getting monotonous for us after a point. So

that season was fun!

The wives all knew each other—Priyanka, Sakshi (Dhoni's wife), Geeta (Harbhajan Singh's wife) and even Shane Watson's wife would all be together when we returned from our practice sessions and matches. They would all be relaxed, spending time in each other's company. Our team had that family vibe to it, since most of the players had their wives and children travelling with them during that memorable IPL season.

What makes this arrangement special is that your performance in the match doesn't always determine your mood or decide how the rest of your day would go. There are times when you win, there are times when you lose. A failure isn't that great, but when it's over you are relieved that at the end of the day you would be going back to your family. When you see your family in the stands, cheering for the team and for you, it motivates you to perform. It's a different kind of drive you feel, to play well in their presence.

Priyanka isn't a big fan of cricket as she has always preferred soccer. I would tell her how things worked in this game, so that she could follow. She used to keep telling me that the players weren't getting enough rest because of the back-to-back tournaments and that the BCCI should do something about it.

Especially for IPL, one needs to travel a lot. And if your family is travelling with you, then there is the extra burden of packing for the kid and having a nanny along, especially now after we had our son Rio. Add to this a hectic flying schedule, with several early-morning flights. But at the end of the day, when you do win, it is a lovely feeling, not just for the players but also for the families. It feels great to be able to celebrate with them. These little moments count.

At some level, having kids also makes you start thinking about the longevity of your career. How long do you play for? How long can you afford to stay away from them? Also, how long do you have to keep playing to make sure they have a great life?

I have played quite a few games, be it GDIs, IPL, Tests, T2OIs, World Cup or even Ranji Trophy. But once you have a family, they have certain expectations of you, regarding your being there for them. Priyanka has been extremely supportive in that way. She herself used to work, but she took good care of the family along with her professional commitments while being a constant support to me.

She would accompany me to my training sessions abroad. She has always looked after my well-being and stood by me. It feels good to have your loved ones around when you are away from home for such long durations. In addition to all the training and advice, if you have your loved ones by your side when you play, you feel more motivated and driven than otherwise. You feel complete.

10

The Chappell Way

It was my fifteenth ODI for the country, and also perhaps the most memorable of my career at that point. I had just won my first-ever man of the match award, and I was over the moon. We were chasing a relatively modest target of 227 on a pitch that had some decent amount of help for spinners, at the Nahar Stadium in Faridabad. England had a very competent bowling attack, led by a young James Anderson alongside their captain Andrew Flintoff and Liam Plunkett.

We lost some early wickets, then some more in the middle overs and were reduced to 92 for 5 by the twenty-fifth over. It was then that Mahi Bhai and I produced one of our many match-winning partnerships at the highest level to see the team home. I finished with an unbeaten 81 off only 89 balls, while he made 38 in our stand of 118.

Irfan (Pathan) and I took the team to a win rather comfortably in the end. It was also my maiden half-century in international cricket. At that stage, I had been in and out of the side, or I had been the first pick as the 'Super Sub' (according to a rule that existed briefly during that period, a team could bring in a replacement at any stage during a match). So, ideally you'd have someone like Murali Kartik or Sreesanth bowling, and then I would come in as the Super Sub to field and bat. I had done that quite a bit, before cementing my place in the starting line-up that day in Faridabad.

That also happened to be the first time Greg Chappell

complimented me on my game as well as on how well I handled the pressure. Even Rahul Dravid said to the team that the way I had handled the match that day showed that the team was united and was heading in the right direction. That made me feel very good, as both of them were stalwarts in the field whom I looked up to. And they were also coach and captain, respectively.

I was right at the beginning of my career playing for the national team. Greg always made sure that we kept learning—be it from our failures or our successes. Even when he knew that I was playing well, he would keep telling me to focus more on my fielding and batting, so that I wouldn't start slacking after a point or take things for granted. He was a result-oriented coach.

He compared me with Brian Lara once, during our tour to the West Indies in 2006. It was a massive moment for me, but I remember his comment created quite a buzz in India. I think it was Greg's way of pushing me further, so I could try and reach my potential as a cricketer. It's what you want to hear from your coach. But the onus is then on the player to live up to the expectations.

Greg would never go soft on us, even when he was praising us. He had an aggressive approach, telling us that we had to work hard and win no matter what. And that attitude helped us a lot. If you make up your mind that you are going to score a hundred today, the chances of you getting there are higher than usual. That's one thing I learnt from him: the ability to motivate yourself without the need for any external impetus.

His drive for success didn't mean Greg couldn't handle failure as a coach. He would hold meetings with senior players to figure out what went wrong after every loss. But when he was with us youngsters, he would just instruct us as to what was to be done. All

he wanted us to know or think about was how to win a match. In that way, he was a lot like Virat, and I liked his attitude. As we were young back then, winning seemed to be the only thing we too wanted to focus on.

Over the years, a lot has been written and said about Greg's time as India coach, about how not everyone liked his style of leadership in the dressing room. Like I mentioned earlier, Greg was always result-oriented, and he would make sure we achieved the results we were aiming for, no matter what. That was the kind of attitude I appreciated since I was just starting my career and was happy to be instructed. However, the senior players of the team were very different, as were their respective equations with him.

In hindsight, he probably should have treated the senior players a bit differently than how he treated us. But again, that's not something that bothered me back then. For me it was simple: if we win, we are praised; if we lose, we are reprimanded. But his intention was to push us to grow further as cricketers and never to demean us in any way. Greg had gone through a lot but had handled it all well.

The team that Dada (Sourav Ganguly) created has always been widely appreciated for making a mark in cricketing history. However, the credit for so many of us youngsters making it into that team goes to Greg, since he was the one who prepared us to take that challenge. He and Kiran More Sir, as the chief selector, were the ones who supported this move. Greg is the number one talent-hunter for sure. He always ensured that the youngsters got their due in the Indian team. And he played an enormous role in getting the likes of R.P. Singh, M.S. Dhoni, Sreesanth, Murali Kartik and

Irfan Pathan among others to play for India with a lot of success.

Irfan Pathan among others to play for India with a lot of success.

The Indian team during my time was like a family. And like in every family, there were times when everyone didn't get along with each other the way you would expect them to. There were some tense moments within the dressing room during Greg's tenure as our coach. I don't think I need to get into the details, as many more illustrious cricketers than me have already laid it out in interviews and books. I can instead talk about how I learnt to deal with those frosty instances and about my takeaways from them.

To start with, such situations would be handled by the senior players back then. Rahul Bhai was a really good captain that way. He would make sure our performances weren't affected due to those issues. So, we as younger players would never be involved in such situations. Whenever they would have their meetings, we would go out for running or training and thus had no idea as to what happened behind closed doors. It's funny how even though we were part of the team, we would get to know about the conclusions reached at these meetings through the media. And I didn't have an issue with that at all.

At the end of the day, I trusted their wisdom and experience, and I knew they would make their decisions keeping in mind the team's best interests—ensuring that we don't lose our unity or motivation to play. In my eyes, Greg was never wrong, since he always strived to make sure the team was on its toes and never favoured any one player.

If you ask Rahul Bhai, I am sure he would tell you in detail the extent of difficulties they had to face during that time. But yes, these conflicts keep taking place. One needs to be tactful while handling them. Greg was ruthless when we lost, but most of it was directed towards the senior players. I do agree that he should have

directed towards the senior players. I do agree that he should have respected them more—people like Sachin and Dada.

Yuvi Pa and Mahi Bhai would tell me not to be bothered by such situations as they kept occurring now and then. They would always ask me to concentrate on my game instead, as that was our primary job—to represent the nation on the cricket field.

At the same time, it was also very important that the dressing room stayed together and entered the field as one unit. That responsibility fell upon both the juniors and the seniors. We had to make sure that there was no divide. And we didn't have to make any extra effort to do so. It was very vital, though, for the progress and the success of the team.

The senior players were extremely important for my own growth. And I had to make sure that they were given their due respect. I won't say that there is a hierarchy in the Indian dressing room. But that doesn't mean a junior player shouldn't acknowledge the senior's place in the side.

Once Greg had asked me to go practise a day before the match, prior to the scheduled training session for that day. I remember one of the senior players of the team came up to me to mock me, saying that I was the only one who got all the 'extra' practice sessions as if it was only me who was going to play the match. So, I quickly asked him to join me because I had no intentions to hurt anyone. My work there was to learn, be it from the coach or the senior players. I wasn't there to compare myself with them at that point, and I wasn't being diplomatic. I was just that naive back then. I would practise as much as possible. For me, ragging was no big deal since I was used to that, thanks to my hostel life. But I wouldn't say anyone ever got 'ragged' in the Indian dressing room. Believe me, I know what ragging is. We didn't have that. What we did have were some

tense moments with some players. There were instances when we would greet some of the senior players in the morning, and they wouldn't greet back. But I never took these to heart.

I knew the only way I could win them over was by performing on the field. And that was what I focused on. Sreesanth, Dhoni, Irfan, Kartik and I would be on our own on all our international trips. It was Yuvi Pa and Viru Pa among the seniors who would always reach out and encourage us to perform well and not get involved in irrelevant things. I think that helped a lot.

They would always guide me, because of which I had a lot of respect for them. It wasn't like the seniors were insecure. There were certain players, like Rahul bhai and Sachin Paaji, who were revered in the dressing room. They would try to keep things calm. As for me, I had always been a leader since my days of playing under-16 tournaments. If there was one thing I had learnt there, it was that nothing that happens in the dressing room should ever affect our performance on the field. And honestly, the fact that I got to practise while they had their meetings really helped me. I remember I used to ask Venugopal Rao to join me. He would often get very nervous if there was any kind of tension among the coaching staff and a player. But I knew that our being there wouldn't help the situation and would only dampen our spirits. So, focusing on bettering our skills made more sense at that point.

Back then, we were not even part of the main playing XI. Even during the international tours, we would just be travelling and training for the most part. Whatever little I did get to play, I would try to perform my best in those innings and to remain not out for as long as possible. There were a few innings in between when Dhoni and I performed well together, in 2005-06, and that was when Greg thought that we had become comfortable playing with each other

and formed a great partnership, starting with that game in Faridabad, of course.

In most cases, it was because of our performances that we got to be a part of the team. It takes time for everyone to get accustomed to changes in leadership and team management. The seniors kept performing well; their performance wasn't affected by these changes. Another significant change at that time was Dravid replacing Dada as the captain. So, it was the accumulation of all these factors that led to the occasional unrest among the seniors. It was a transitional period for the team. We always acted according to what we could see in front of us, not what we heard from the others.

Not every junior player felt comfortable in that situation. But my relations with Rahul Bhai were very good. I remember when he was nearing his century at Lord's in 2011—always a big achievement for any Indian batsman, considering how few have done it—he wanted me to come out and be a runner for him. It felt good to be trusted that way, even if he told me to make sure he didn't get run out because of me. And you could see, by the way he celebrated, how much the century meant to him.

Through it all, that's the one thing that has never changed in me: being happy for everyone's success. That has been one aspect of my cricket that I've taken a lot of pride in. And from what I saw, that was more or less the same with everyone even during our difficult times. Having done well on the field, I never got the feeling from anyone that they weren't pleased for me. And I think the credit goes to Rahul Bhai as well. He would always maintain a balance within the team. Without him, we would have never got to play in that time of constant conflicts. Of course, there were times when some player ended up blabbering stuff to the media, but Dravid would

always make sure that none of us felt attacked and that we maintained a certain sense of unity, so we could play well. And I continued to perform as best I could.

I remember we had all done quite well in a series against England at that time, in 2006. Yuvi and I had scored. Harbhajan had taken a few wickets while Ramesh Powar had also done really well. Irfan had played well with bat and ball. So, at the end of the day, it was team effort that one would see on the field. Be that as it may, we juniors wouldn't be chatting with the seniors. We would just greet each other in the morning and that was it. Perhaps it had more to do with my shyness than anything else back then. It was only during our bus rides that we would end up having a conversation, and that if the seniors asked us any questions. Mostly, these would be Dravid, Lax-man, Yuvraj or Viru.

The selectors should be given credit for constantly maintaining communication with us regarding our performance. They had a big role to play in maintaining order too, or at least making sure that none of the players ever got anxious or insecure.

Greg was still new on the job and settling in when I met him for the first time. It was during a Challenger Trophy match between India Seniors and India A, at the Wankhede Stadium in 2005. Dhoni, Harbhajan and a lot of us were playing during that season. As I mentioned earlier, Greg's brother, Trevor, had spotted me in England while I was playing league cricket there. So, Greg had heard about me a little.

We had to go through all our fitness tests and check-ups to start with. And Greg was immediately rather impressed with how well I did in those. In those days, I had a weak grasp of the English language. But he was very good with all the youngsters— Irfan,

Robin, Piyush, Sreesanth, me and the others.

In 2006, we had to go to Malaysia to play against Australia and the West Indies in the DLF Cup tournament. That was the season Mitchell Johnson had burst on to the scene. I had a couple of decent outings there, and Greg and I grew closer.

Before getting to know him, I had heard about how great a batsman Greg was, among the few in Australia to have played over 100 Tests, but I didn't know anything beyond that. I had only heard of him and his siblings—all cricketers—but had never seen any of them play. However, when I met Greg and got to know more about him, and when he started training us daily, that was when I realized how great he was. You automatically start respecting such a passionate sportsman.

Honestly, in the beginning, whenever he would say something, I would back off a little, joining the crowd of players, so that I could observe whatever the senior players were being asked to do and could just act as they would. I was very shy, and nervousness prevails when you don't want to make a fool of yourself amid such experienced players.

Greg emphasized a lot on technique, offering us constant tips on how to give our best in the game. He always asked us to play aggressively instead of going soft. All this helped boost our confidence eventually. And he gave a lot of chances to the juniors in the team—especially those in their late teens. He would ensure that we were prepared, both physically and mentally, for our international tours. After the official training hours, he would stay back with us youngsters to help us prepare ourselves psychologically, telling us how to handle things off the field, the media being one of the focal points of these sessions. This holistic training helped us a lot in the long run.

training helped us a lot in the long run.

I think it was an extremely good decision on the part of the BCCI to have a man with his experience to come and coach us. Greg always told us, after every international tournament, that we needed to keep going back to domestic cricket. He vouched for the importance of playing a lot of cricket to get better at playing cricket. That piece of advice helped me personally. He would emphasize on the Ranji Trophy and would often come along to watch some of the games. Very few international coaches do that anywhere in the world.

He would challenge players to focus on constantly pushing themselves and finding new ways to train. He wasn't a gym person as such, but he was brilliant with endurance training. He would make us work on improving our fielding; Yuvraj, Sachin, me—all of us benefitted from that.

He would also do things differently. Constantly change things around. We would practise on cement surfaces. He would make us play with stumps and hockey sticks. Then, he would share his own experiences with us and make us do activitybased routines, like playing blindfolded. I remember we had a series in South Africa where Sreesanth bowled very well. We won a Test match there as well. He helped us focus on the game well. The fact that he would involve the youngsters so much brought about a lot of structural changes within the team, setting a new paradigm in team formation.

In my opinion, Greg deserves a lot of credit for shaping that generation of Indian players. The fruits of the seeds he had sown were seen much later, when we won the 2011 World Cup. He taught us to chase totals. We were all playing well at that point, but I remember him stressing a lot on breaking down run chases at batting meetings. The credit for that goes to both Greg and Rahul

Bhai. Eventually, the batting order was fixed very well—Yuvi, Dhoni and me. By then, we had learnt how to take the pressure as well as the responsibility of chasing and winning.

I picked up a lot of lessons from Greg. But I think somewhere along the line, despite all the controversies around his coaching career, he taught India how to win and the importance of winning.

11

The Rollercoaster Ride

'Khana khane aaye ho ya World Cup jeetne?'

I'm still not sure to this day whom that comment by Sachin Paaji was directed at or intended for. Perhaps it was meant for us all. Perhaps it was just him venting out some frustration. Whatever it was, the message was loud and clear. It had been so for the entirety of the World Cup. In fact, Paaji made sure that we never lost sight of the goal even while we were prepping for the event, playing our warm-up games.

Paaji wanted us to have one focus: winning the World Cup. There could be no distractions, either external or internal. To the extent that he had even decided that no families would be allowed to travel with the team during the tournament. He wanted us to experience every high and low, every win and loss, together. We were to focus on each other. A few grumbling tummies wasn't going to put us off our journey to the top.

Paaji's mini outburst had transpired in Mohali on the day we were preparing to take Pakistan on in the semi-final. You couldn't have asked for a bigger match of course, not just in terms of significance but also the setting. The prime ministers of both countries were in attendance, along with the who's who of Bollywood and Indian politics. It felt like a massive occasion. It was a massive occasion. It was much more than a cricket match between two neighbouring countries.

The massive celebrity presence and the manic security presence around the IS Bindra Stadium meant that our food didn't reach the venue on time. We had also got to the ground earlier than usual. Generally, for ODIs, you would have a bite for sure before the match began. I don't know how many of us had even had breakfast that morning. It was that kind of setting. I would be lying if I said there were no nerves in the system already. But as 2.30 p.m. approached, there was nothing but butterflies in the tummy. Nobody in the team was too critical or vocal about this inconvenience, though. There was just some grumbling under the breath. Even that was put to an end, however, once Sachin Paaji made himself heard around the dressing room.

It did help that MS won the toss and we elected to bat. At least we didn't have to go field on empty stomachs. You could see

Viru Pa was quite hungry when he went in to bat, and he made the Pakistani new-ball bowlers pay for it, smashing Umar Gul and Abdul Razzaq for boundaries all around the ground. I think we all forgot about our hunger too, thanks to Viru Pa. Sachin Paaji batted brilliantly, but when he got out, we were still far from getting a competitive score.

He had motivated me a lot leading up to that game and throughout the World Cup. In the quarter-final against Australia, it was Paaji who walked up to me in the dressing room and said it was going to be my day. Here again, the look we exchanged as we walked past each other after the fall of his wicket told me that he was backing me to play a match-winning knock again.

This was a time during the tournament when MS wasn't at his best and was still trying to find his form. When he got out not long after, the score was 205/6, and I was left with the lower order, with still more than eight overs to go. As he left, MS told me I had to bat till

more than eight overs to go. As he left, MS told me I had to bat till the last ball, whatever happens. And if I did, we would get to a very defendable total. In such moments, it's those few words of encouragement that can get you playing your best. That's what happened.

Wahab Riaz was bowling an incredible spell that day. He was using the crease beautifully and getting the ball to come in at that sharp angle. He was also bowling really quick. He was troubling batsmen and was getting regular wickets. I had to not only make sure I scored runs, but I also had to somehow keep my partners away from Wahab as much as possible. I decided to pick up as many ones and twos as I could, running at even the slightest opportunity. There were some very useful contributions from Bhajji Pa (Harbhajan Singh), Zak Bhai (Zaheer Khan) and even Ashish Bhai (Nehra) in the end. We managed to put 5 5 runs together for the last three wickets and got the score to 260/9.1 managed to hit only three fours, but the thirty-nine-ball 3 6 eventually made the difference, considering we won narrowly by 29 runs to qualify for the final.

The game played out exactly how Sachin Paaji wanted it to. Pakistan fought hard, as you'd expect them to, but our bowlers kept their nerve and pulled it off. I was happy to have taken a very important catch to dismiss the dangerous Younis Khan. We were overjoyed in the end. There was a sense of relief too.

It was a lesson for all of us. However big the occasion, and however big it might seem, if you focus on your ultimate goal, you would always end up achieving it. The secret is to not get swayed or overawed. It's better to soak in the moment, enjoy being out there, and let your instincts and skills guide you. We did that as a team during that crucial semi-final, and stuck to doing that throughout the World Cup.

the World Cup.

Sachin Paaji had taken over the role of mentor for the World Cup from the very start. Yes, he still had to prepare individually too. But he was desperate to win for the nation, and he took care that everyone was as motivated as him, if not more. That was a big driving force for us. We were all pretty excited too, since this was going to be his last World Cup before he retired.

Wherever we went around the country during that period, people would keep chanting the same thing—that they wanted us to win the World Cup. At times it would rankle the nerves when we thought about what would happen if we lost. We hadn't forgotten the aftermath of the 2007 World Cup, when our players and their families were treated very unkindly after the team had bowed out in the early stages of the tournament.

Even back home for me, in the days leading up to the World Cup, everyone in the family kept talking about how this was our cup to win. We were playing at home, so we had our best chance. There was no other topic of discussion.

I remember we made a mixed start. We won our opener against Bangladesh and tied against England in that dramatic match in Bangalore before beating Ireland easily. Then came the defeat against South Africa in Nagpur. We had a break I think, and I remember going home for a couple of days. The atmosphere everywhere was quite negative and upsetting. We weren't dominating the way everyone expected us to. But we regrouped remarkably after that. The takeaway for me, especially after listening to Sachin Paaji, was that we should always try and play to our own expectations, not someone else's.

As players, it's always more important to focus on each match than

think about the end goal of winning the World Cup. But it's easier said than done, of course. It takes a lot. We were lucky to have the likes of Sachin Paaji, and also others like MS and coach Gary Kirsten, to keep the dressing room very calm.

The moment we would start practising or playing a match, we would shut everything out. The rest of the world would cease to matter, as our entire focus would be on the game. What's important in any sport is the feeling of unity within the team. We were one big family—we had to face everything together, take credit together, take the blame together, face challenges together and go all the way supporting each other for the next two months. And Gary had mentored all of us very well.

He had emphasized a lot on the process. This wasn't any old cliche to us. It meant something. We believed in it. We believed we could go on to fulfil our collective ambition of becoming world champions. But we also believed we had to follow a process to get there. We would do a lot of yoga and other fitness-related activities that would also help us bond. Sachin Paaji had made it a rule that we would always eat together, no matter where we were.

Gary, too, would make sure that everyone was doing everything together and that no one was left alone, to prevent any kind of negativity building up within anyone. And that worked for us. The dressing room was rather family-like, and everyone looked after everyone else, even with their tiniest of needs. Paddy Upton was another great asset to our dressing room. He had made it clear that we could speak our mind to him. His door was always open for us. We could tell him everything. That added to the trust in the camp. And we were also united in our mission to make sure that Sachin Paaji's last World Cup ended in glory. That brought us together more than anything else.

* * *

World Cups aren't won in the space of a few weeks. Not in any sport. Lifting the trophy is always the culmination of months, if not years, of planning and preparation. That was certainly the case with us in 2011.

It was the same for me individually. I was developing and growing with each game, each series, each moment during the years leading up to the tournament. Missing out on the 2007 World Cup squad due to injury was painful. But it made me even more determined to ensure that I was at the peak of my powers when the World Cup came around on our home soil.

From 2008-10,1 was in great form. I even got the opportunity to be the captain in 2010, on the Zimbabwe tour. At the Chennai Super Kings, we won a couple of tournaments consecutively, and then the Champions League T20. That was also when Virat arrived on the scene.

Gary was a big influence for us—be it in terms of our fitness or our batting. We started paying extra attention to the former, with a new set of young players joining us from Virat's batch. I was very focused on the game, on how to practise more and be in my best shape to perform well. MS and I were already playing together for Chennai.

By that time, I had played several one-day matches over the years and experienced a variety of scenarios. I had also batted up and down the order. That helped me understand the challenges of walking out to bat in every situation possible. After all, you never know when you would be called upon to perform during a World Cup game.

My brief stint as captain was timely, as it gave me an opportunity to think a lot more about different aspects of the game. It gave me an added responsibility within the team. So overall, I was in a good frame of mind, which is of utmost importance for any professional athlete. I kept training and working as hard as I could. That's often the best way to maintain that state of mind.

Everyone around me was doing the same, prepping themselves for the World Cup. My focus was on the thought that whenever and wherever I am given a chance, I would excel and give it my best shot.

We were on that path as a team too. Yuvi, Virat and I made a good fielding trio. If you look at it as a unit, that team was the best we have had for fifty-over cricket. We would practise bowling for hours—Viru, Yuvi, Yusuf, Virat and I, even though we were primarily batsmen. It just added so much more variety to the attack. It gave MS multiple options, which is what you need as a fielding captain in limited-overs cricket. Except Gauti Bhai (Gautam Gambhir), everyone else could bowl in that playing group. It was more than a bonus.

In cricket, they say when you're in good form as a batsman, make it count. It isn't always that straightforward, however, especially when you're batting in the middle order in ODI cricket. You don't really know how much time you would get to bat. The scenarios keep changing. Sometimes you get ten overs, sometimes even fewer. It all depends on the performance of the top order.

When Sachin would get out, Yuvi and I would have to pick up as many runs as we could. That partnership would work out well at times, while on some days it wouldn't click. I was anyway accustomed to the right-left batting formation. As a result, mostly

accustomed to the right-left batting formation. As a result, mostly my partnerships would be with

Dhoni. We would try our best to accelerate and push the run rate.

There could also be the possibility of my having to shepherd the tail, which was the case in the World Cup semi-final. So, I would have some batting sessions with the lower order too, with Ashu Bhai or Bhajji Pa, just to get used to it.

Despite all that preparation, I wasn't a first-choice player at the start of the World Cup. Yusuf Pathan was the one picked for that No. 7 slot. He'd had a very good tour of South Africa right before the tournament. I never let it get to me, though. I have always been a team player. So I continued working harder, to make sure I was ready when required.

Mahi Bhai would ask me to come in as a substitute quite often, which kept me involved in the game. I remained calm, telling myself that I would get a chance to play— especially in the knockouts. It's another key lesson in life, to control the controllables. Now, I couldn't force the hand of the team management to pick me. I had to wait for that opportunity. So there was no point getting anxious or insecure. It was just a case of trusting yourself, backing yourself and waiting for when the time is right.

It's best at such times to commit yourself to the team's needs. For me, that included basic tasks like making sure those playing got their food on time and keeping them hydrated on the field during the game. These things are extremely important, which the players often tend to overlook. As a substitute, I had to take care of these. And even if you aren't playing, simply getting to see someone like Sachin Tendulkar practise from close quarters is inspiration

enough.

Finally, as I had expected, my chance did come. It was in our first knockout game, the quarter-final against Australia in Ahmed-abad. My first game in the tournament was against the West Indies, in Chennai, but I couldn't make much of an impact with the bat. I did take the crucial wicket of Darren Bravo, though.

It was a tricky run chase for us in that quarter-final against Australia. We needed to get 261 against a solid Aussie attack, skippered by Ricky Ponting, who was buoyed after scoring a fantastic century. Viru Pa was out early, after which Paaji and Gauti Bhai steadied the ship. Then we lost a few wickets quickly, with MS's tough run with the bat continuing. I had been waiting to go out for a while when Paaji came to me and said that my time had come. This would be the day I would contribute to our World Cup journey turning successful. It filled me with great confidence.

At 187/5, we still had a fair way to go. Yuvi had batted like a dream throughout that tournament. He was well set. But I felt like the onus was on me to break free and take the load off him. It was up to me to take a few risks. On my fifth ball, I took on a short delivery from Brett Lee and hit it for four. Yuvi Pa walked up to me and said, 'Play carefully. If you get out, it's game over.' I asked him not to worry about it and added, 'If I were to get out, it would be game over for my career too.' And he just burst out laughing and said, 'Saale mera bhi career khatam hojaayega phir.' It settled the nerves further.

On a couple of occasions, some of the Aussies tried to sledge me. I didn't pay much heed, but I was just about to respond to something Brad Haddin said when Yuvi Pa intervened and asked me to cool down. I told him I would focus on rotating the strike, but if they

bowled in my slot I would go for it. And that was what I did soon after, hitting Lee for a six. Yuvi Pa was elated with the shot, but then asked me to not take any more risks. I told him to relax, assuring him that we were in control of the match. 'You're the finisher here, and I'll be with you till the end,' I told him. And we did just that.

Beating Pakistan in the semi-final was a strange feeling. It was good, don't get me wrong. But there was more relief than joy. Despite it being a big win in a big game, we couldn't feel too elated. There was, after all, one last big step to take—the small matter of a World Cup final to win. Not to forget, no home team had ever won it before.

It was a very strong Sri Lankan team that we were up against at the Wankhede

Stadium. There were stars from top to bottom, and they had played really well in their group stages before beating both England and New Zealand convincingly. They had Sanga (Kumar Sangakkara), Mahela (Jayawardene), (Lasith) Malinga, Murali (Muttiah Muralitharan), (Tillakaratne) Dil-shan and (Angelo) Mathews.

I think it really helped that we didn't have too much time between the semi-final and the final. We travelled the day after beating Pakistan, trained on the next day and then went straight into the final. It meant we never got the time to sit and think about the enormity of playing in a World Cup final.

There was quite a bit of pressure. Sri Lanka had made quite a good total of 274 for 6, with Mahela Jayawardene scoring a brilliant century. Players like him perform brilliantly even under such high

pressure. We were expecting Viru Pa and Sachin Paaji to get things rolling similarly. The bigger the match, the more you expect the big names to stand up. However, Malinga put an end to those dreams very early on.

The partnership that followed between Virat and Gauti Bhai is, I think, the most underrated part of our win. It took the pressure right off the rest of the batting line-up. Murali was getting the ball to turn a long way, and the batsmen were under a lot of pressure. But Virat and Gauti Bhai played expertly. Then came the famous masterstroke of Mahi walking out ahead of Yuvi.

It was purely a logical move. MS wanted to maintain the right-left combination in the middle, to thwart the off-spin challenge posed by Murali and Suraj Randiv.

I was padded up in the end, but you got this feeling that those two would finish it off. It was only fair that Yuvi Pa was out there in the middle for the winning runs. There were many goosebumps-inducing moments on that day. Right at the top was the time when the entire stadium broke into a rendition of 'Vande Mataram'. I will never forget that feeling. I still get a buzz from recalling that moment.

Being part of a World Cup squad is an honour in itself. The tournament happens once in four years. You can be in top form for a period of time, but there's no guarantee that you'll get to play in one. We've seen so many players who spent a lifetime preparing to play a World Cup but just missed out. Even when you're there, things can go wrong, like Ashu Bhai missing out on playing the final.

And to win it is just extraordinary. I've been asked many times what it feels like to win a World Cup. I am still trying to figure out

What it feels like to win a World Cup. I am still trying to figure out the right answer to that question. How do you even sum it up in words? For the first two months post that night at the Wankhede, it didn't sink in, to be honest. We were also playing back-to-back tournaments. First came the IPL, and then we were off to the Caribbean, where I was captain of the ODI and T20I teams. But you could

sense how the mood of the country had lifted.

There were celebrations everywhere. Wherever we went during that IPL, people had smiles on their faces. They greeted and welcomed us like heroes. We were on cloud nine. When I went back home to Ghazi -abad, the entire town seemed to be at my place—politicians, people, friends and family. My parents were very proud. Dad kept saying it was my hard work that had got me that far.

I have kept my medal carefully, and my dad makes sure it's absolutely clean and shiny, even now, ten years after we won it. I love to look at it whenever I am home. And simply holding it brings back such amazing memories of one of the best periods of my life. I don't even need to close my eyes for the flashbacks to start playing.

I am really proud of my achievement, but being a World Cup winner comes with an added sense of responsibility. You can't take things for granted and get carried away. You still need to stay humble, even when you're on top of the world. At times, it's how you deal with the heady heights that prepares you for coping with everything that life has to throw at you. The win, if anything, increased my dedication towards the game, making me more disciplined and determined to do better than ever before. It also gave me added perspective on how to balance my cricket with spending time with family and friends.

How often have you heard that in sport you experience more failures than victories? So, when you do win, it's important you celebrate those moments. You try and stay in them for as long as possible. And I mean even the small victories.

I remember after winning the World Cup, we were all together, shuffling between Sachin's and Mahi's rooms till about six in the morning, and no one slept. Everyone was getting calls from their loved ones. My phone's battery died some three times, and I would keep looking for the charger every alternate hour. I talked to my parents for a very long time that night. After a while, I switched to the landline. It was an eventful and happy evening. We wished it would never end.

Even today, the one memory that is extremely fresh in my mind is when we all took the picture right after the World Cup win with our trophy. They were playing 'Vande Mataram' in the background. Stuff like that you can never forget—it's like a diamond moment of your life.

There are a few such moments in a cricketer's career. Your debut match for the country, or having Viru Pa handing you your Test cap. You always cherish those memories. You live once, but these memories can last many lifetimes.

Winning the IPL for the first time with CSK was different. It was very special, but in IPL you're not playing for your country. So, the emotions were different. As you know, with the Super Kings, the set-up is very professional. Srini Sir (N. Srinivasan) is a great motivator himself, and the team feels like a family.

We had lost narrowly in the final in 2008 and didn't qualify for the final in 2009. The stage was set for us to go all the way in 2010. Our batting line-up was very strong, with (Michael) Hussey, (Matthew)

Hayden, Murali Vijay and a couple of others, including me, in good form. Subramanian Badrinath was very crucial to us as well. And Mahi was in his best form at that time. Whatever he touched turned to silverware. Wherever he went, he returned with a title. The final match between Mumbai Indians and CSK was intense; both the teams had played tremendously well throughout the season. There's great rivalry between the two franchises too.

That IPL win in 2010, in hindsight, was the perfect precursor for our World Cup campaign. For those involved with CSK, it boosted our confidence a lot. From the captaincy point of view, it was a really good win for Mahi before the World Cup. In fact, at that point, the entire World Cup squad—be it me, Ashwin, Mahi—all of us were doing well and giving our best performances. I had scored a 100 in the debut Test match as well. Becoming the first Indian to score a T20I ton, that too against South Africa in the World T20, added to my burgeoning confidence.

It's so important in life to be able to bottle up those highs, so that you can go back to them whenever you need a little boost or extra motivation. Winning is truly a habit, one that you can get into only with the right mindset. But a cricketer also needs to take into consideration the fact that your shelflife is limited and often unpredictable. One serious injury can restrict your progress and maybe even put an end to all your dreams. So when things are going your way, you don't simply ride the wave but get on top of it and make it last longer.

The IPL has been a game changer on that front, as it gives players longer futures and also a massive sense of security. We've also seen it change lives completely, as in the case of T. Natarajan recently. But even then, being disciplined and diligent towards your sport is how you can ensure you stay on top of your game.

Winning a World Cup changes your life. There's no doubt about it. And every member of that 2011 squad has taken something or the other from that World Cup, going on to lead better lives. I eventually went into business, Gambhir embraced politics, some became family men, some, like Virat and Ashwin, became world-class cricketers who will go down in history among the best ever.

A moment like a World Cup win is considered the ultimate point in the growth of a cricketer. But funnily enough, it's how you grow from that point on that ends up defining you as a person. For you never know when things can start going against you. That's one certainty in life. Nothing lasts forever. Your life will be filled with ups and downs. That's the beauty of life. And it's the same in sports.

What you need to do is keep riding the wave in front of you, as the tide is constantly changing. There are so many ways a cricketer's life can get impacted. You could lose form. You could get dropped. You could get injured. There's no cricketer who hasn't experienced it all in his or her career.

I have heard people talk about how I could have played more Test cricket or how I could have been a better Test cricketer. I don't look at it like that. I strongly believe in destiny, and I believe I played exactly the number of Test cricket I was meant to play. And it's not like I ever stopped trying to be the best Test player possible.

There were times when I maybe didn't make the most of my opportunities. And there were also times when I felt like I was at the peak of my red-ball game, but there simply weren't any vacancies in the Test middle order. All you can do then is to keep performing in domestic cricket and hope that your time will come.

Being injured can be even more debilitating than that, as I've

Being injured can be even more debilitating than that, as I've written earlier.

That's because in that scenario you have no control over anything. I honestly believed I would never get to play for India again after my first surgery in 2007. But I never gave up. I told myself that till the time I enjoy putting in the hard yards and try to reclaim my place in the Indian team, whether it was post an injury or after getting dropped, I will keep fighting. That's what I did for well over a decade. But there comes a time in every cricketer's life when you need to take a call on if you can continue doing it. I think I reached that point in 2020.

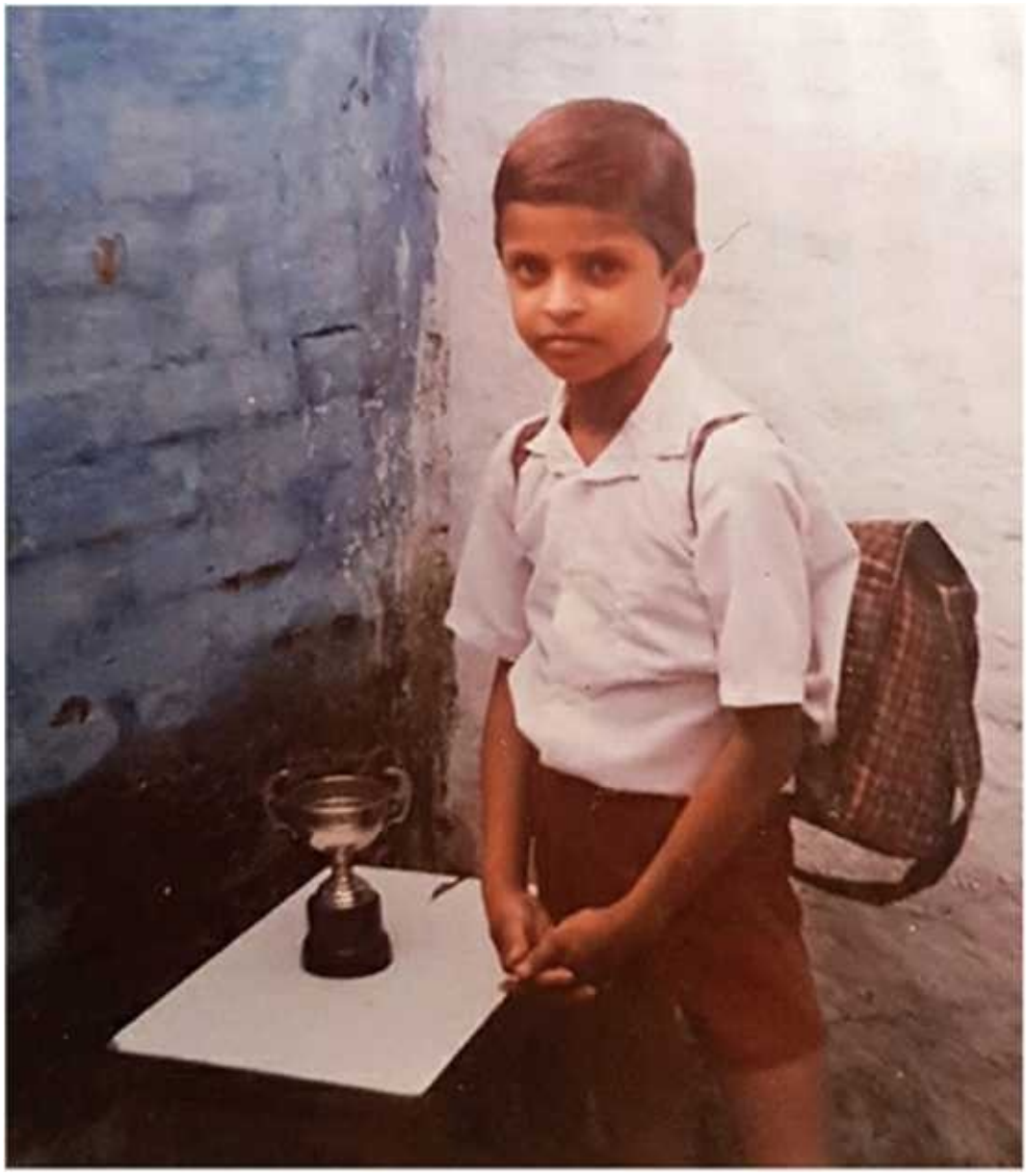
At times, it's also important to quit when you're still on top of your game. People may say that I left a bit prematurely. But I've never thought about the game as a commercial venture. For me, it was always about enjoyment, and commitment towards the game and my team's success. I felt like I wasn't enjoying the game at the international level, so it was the right time to hang up my boots. I can now say with confidence and from my own experience that leaving when people say 'why'—and not 'why not'—is indeed the best way to do it.

Of course, people have spoken a lot about why I decided to do so on the same day as Mahi Bhai. He did it. I also did it. And we both decided to continue playing for CSK and domestic cricket. You can say it was a poetic finish for us, considering our relationship and our respective journeys. Our careers for India started a year apart.

We played together all this while. Retiring alongside him was a tribute to what he's done for the country, what he's done for the game and what he's done for me. I really enjoyed batting with him, and I enjoy his company off the field.

Another reason for my retirement was that I wanted to spend more time with my children. Rio was born in April 2020, only a few months before I took that decision. I never got to spend that kind of time with my parents. My parents are also old now, and they never quite got to be part of my entire journey, especially the early hardships. I think it's important that parents get that time with their kids early on. Once the children reach 10-12 years of age, it's never the same. To understand your child before that is important for both the parents and the kids.

This is not the end, though. I believe there's plenty more I can give back to the game. I believe there's plenty more the game can get out of me. I believe …



I always want to give my best in whatever I do. This trophy, which I won in school in Muradnagar, was my first.

World Cup 2011 can never be forgotten. Thinking of the moment when we lifted the trophy after twenty-eight long years for our country still gives me the same thrill.

A moment that will be cherished

for generations to come!

Never letting me fall. Yuvi Bhai, you have always been by my side!

Mahi Bhai, thanks for being my biggest supporter and a mentor anyone would wish for. My respect for you only keeps growing!

My first Man of the Match award in Faridabad!

Mahi Bhai and his love for bikes...

Thanks, Sachin Sir, for hosting us at your place on my thirty-first birthday. The food was delicious, and I loved your hospitality!

I will forever be grateful for choosing you as my life partner, Priyanka. This day, 3 April 2015, marked the beginning of this beautiful chapter in my life.

On 15 May 2016, we were blessed with our baby girl, Gracia, in Amsterdam. Had to miss an IPL match to be with Priyanka and my daughter.

On 23 March 2020, when the world came to a standstill because of the lockdown, I was blessed with one of the biggest joys in the world. Rio, you mean the world to me.

You bring out the best in me. I love you beyond words. This was Rio's first trip to Mukteshwar.

No words can ever describe what you mean in my life, Priyanka. Thank you for always being my pillar of strength!

This was the first time my parents came to visit me in Amsterdam, in July 2018. Sometimes, quality time with your family is all you need.

It was an honour to spend time with the jawaans of our nation. You inspire us in so many ways.

We are all very proud of what you do for us!

https://www.leighiournal.co.uk/ news/317409 S.captains-log-chris-bullock-skipper-of-astley-and-tyldesley-cc/

Acknowledgements

My life has been a journey filled with great learnings. And on that path, I've met a multitude of people who've all played a great role in shaping my life. Each one of them has been a teacher to me, and I owe them all a massive debt of gratitude.

It started with my parents and siblings. Then came the coaches at the Lucknow Sports Hostel and those who looked after me in my junior cricket days. They were followed by the incredible coaches I've played under at the international level and in the IPL.

I've also been extremely fortunate to have met and been mentored by some incredible senior players throughout my career, both at state level and in the Indian dressing room. I wouldn't be where I am without the lessons that were handed down to me by my teammates.

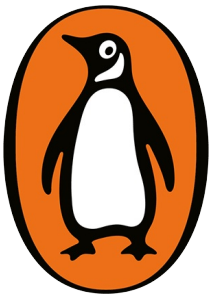
I also want to pass on special thanks to all the doctors who got me back on my feet, literally, each time I went down with an injury. They were always there to make sure that I not only made it back to the field but also returned stronger.

My wife, Priyanka, along with my kids, Gracia and Rio, make sure that I continue learning every day to be a better husband and father. That learning, I suppose, will never stop.

I also want to thank my management team, Neeraj Chaurasia, Anand Kanwar and Rishiraj Gudwani, for settingup this book as a platform to chronicle my life.

I couldn't have done this without Bharat Bhai. The patience he showed in digging out every aspect of my life before putting all the

showed in digging out every aspect of my life before putting all the pieces together was remarkable. He made sure that the final product was one that every reader would enjoy and also, hopefully, learn from.



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